

Anima by Hatter23

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Summary: Your Anima is the representation of your soul. El is on the run from the lab, Mike is a business man just looking for his soulmate. What happens when their lives cross, and everything changes for the both of them? Bad description, read more by checking out chapter 1! Soulmate AU, Mileven centric of course!

1. Fox and Wolf

Okay, soooo, I know I said I wasn't going to start another fanfiction before I finished my other one buuuut, this one has been dancing in my mind forever and we just went to NYC and the story just kind of laid itself out in front of me and I kind of had to write it.

So, I have a fascination with connections between animals and humans and have always liked the idea behind His Dark Materials, and I love stories about soulmates, so I kind of wanted to test it out.

This is definitely an AU where like in His Dark Materials a person's soul is separate from them and takes form as an animal that represents the person. I changed it up a bit from HDM, but kind of the same thing too.

So, here's the trial chapter, and I hope you guys enjoy it!

Anima: A creature that is a physical representation of a human's soul. The creature changes throughout a human's life. They say that when a human has found their soulmate, their creatures will take the same form together and will remain in that form forever.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or His Dark Materials.

June 7th, 1993

Her well worn white chucks scuff along the torrent streets of endless pavement. The pungent sewery smell of the city causes her to wrinkle her nose as she follows the fast paced movements of those around her as she passes each block. A million different sounds traverse around her, and she silently hates it. Someone who's talking loudly into their personal communicator just about knocks her into the streets, and she casts them a steely stare. They, of course don't pay no mind to her, and she rolled her eyes effortlessly as she awaits for the L.E.D red hand to turn into a white stick figure.

She *despises* New York city. And she has hated it since the moment she had to step foot into the bloated city. From the putrid stench that never seemed to fade, to the endless noise, and overcrowding, El could honestly pull her hair out. But, there was no other choice for her, and she sighed heavily at the thought as her rich amber eyes finally fell on the green sign that read: 15th avenue.

A puff of air escaped her nostrils, as she made a hasty left cut as she weaved her way through the sea of people before her. She shivered each time she had to make the briefest of contact with the people around her, it was too much for her, and that's why she barely left her home, which is where she was currently heading for now.

"El!" a squeaky, yet soft voice caught her attention, and pulled El out of her reverie. A tight pull knotted in her stomach, and El moved off to the side, as she turned towards the owner of the voice.

El's eyes flashed to the small creature that was tailing her. A small, brilliantly colored fox danced it's way between the crowds of people before finally getting closing in on El. And once the creature was close enough, it pounced effortlessly and landed squarely on El's shoulder. The weight was nothing El wasn't used to, and she couldn't help but give the small creature a quick smile, as she caressed it beneath it's chin.

"You *know* we can't be separated like that" the creature scolded her, El rolled her eyes teasingly as she turned and began to walk again.

"Vera, you worry too much" El scoffs as the feeling of her anima being so closely connected to her, makes El's body warm, her nerves seem to melt away. She never liked being around too many people.

El casts her sight forward, as she continues to go deeper into the city, moving further away from the large skyscrapers that surrounded her. A feeling of safety slowly began to wash over her as the buildings started to become smaller, less cleaner. But, El didn't care, she could feel her anxiety begin to lessen as she got closer and closer to her home.

Finally, El made a sharp turn to the right, walking down a dark alleyway. She eventually came to a stop in front of an old steel door

that was once painted a bright red, but was now deeply scratched and covered in multiple layers of graffiti.

El lifted her hand and knocked out a secret code, however, she ended it with a swift kick to the door, the sound echoing through the alley. After waiting patiently for a couple of seconds, the steel door creaked open just a bit, and El slinked her small body through the hole.

"Geez, Shirley, sure did take you some time to get here," a disgruntled voice greeted her as she pulled her patched rucksack from across her shoulder, Veda maneuvering just so to avoid the strap, jumping down from El's shoulder. El huffed, rolling her eyes as she made her way into the old abandoned warehouse that she called home.

A group of four young adults sit about gazing at El as she walks in. "Shut it Axel, you know it takes time and skill to get what we need" El throws the mohawked individual a look as she sets her semi-full pack onto the decrepit wooden table that sits in the middle of the warehouse, where the rest of her friends sit. A large grey pitbull, sits by his side and eyes her just as wairily as Axel does.

The rest of the gang members eye the bag greedily, as El dumps out the contents. Multiple cans of various food land loudly against the table as they roll this way and that.

"Don't know how you're so good at it" a woman with crazy colored hair admires her work with a nod, her Anima, a female scarlet macaw sits perched on her shoulder, "Yes, well done El" she squaks and El gives a small smile "You just have to take your time is all" El answers tiredly as she turns on her feet and begins to head towards her room, Veda tailing her.

"Not even going to say 'hi' to your sister upon your return?" another voice bounces off the walls around the warehouse. A smile pulls at El's lips as she moves her head upwards to where she sees her 'sister' standing at the top of the stairwell.

Her black hair is flipped just perfectly to the side, as a large all black snake sits loosely wrapped around the girls neck. The snakes head lifts, it's beady eyes meets El's, and she can't help but feel a shiver down her spine. Even though an Anima is a figment of a person's

soul, there's something about the reptilian ones that cause El slight discomfort. It doesn't help that her own sister's happens to be a large ratsnake.

She inwardly tries to hold in her cringe, but she knows Veda, her own representation of her own soul struggles to do so. And El sighs as Kali slowly walks down the winding staircase, El's eyes follow her movements until she is directly in front of her.

Kali gives her a wide grin, "Still frightened of Ros are you?" she teases as the snake slinks off of the girls neck and dances directly in front of El's vision. El swallows nervously, she tries to feign interest, "You *know* I have a thing with reptiles" she attempts to pull her gaze away from the tantalizing snake, but fails to do so.

Ros flicks her tongue out at her, tickling El's nose as she tries to not flinch away "You never had a problem with me before" Ros hisses, a hint of a smile playing on her scaly mouth, *almost* easing El's anxiety.

"That was when you were a cute little bunny when we were little, I don't get the whole snake thing now" El digresses as Ros finally pulls away.

Kali juts out her neck as she strokes Ros affectionately, "Anima's change as a person does" she speaks to El as if she doesn't know this, and El finds herself slightly annoyed as she lifts an eyebrow in challenge.

"You'd think I didn't know that" she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"*El, careful*", Veda's voice rings through her head, and El softens slightly, *really* not wanting to get into a confrontation now with Kali. El silently thanks her partner and shakes her head.

"Look, it's been a long day, I just want to turn in" El finally quips, her shoulder sagging as she does so. She peeks back up at Kali who nods and steps away from the bottom of the stairwell.

"As you wish, Jane" she says with a crooked grin and it takes everything in El to not bite back, but with a tight smile El bids the

girl goodnight as she makes a beeline straight up the stairs and turns into her room, shutting the door behind her, releasing a breath she didn't know she was holding.

Kali and her relationship had become tenser in the last handful of years. They were once very close to one another, but something had changed between them since arriving in NYC almost five years ago.

El shakes her head though, not wanting to go into those thoughts right now.

So, with a flick of her head the one light that hangs dimly in the center of her room turns on, as her back remains on the closed door.

She feels Veda rub up against her legs, "Everything okay?" the small fox looks up at her, both of their matching amber eyes meet and El feels the annoyance of what just occurred melt away.

She smiles at her partner, nodding slowly, "Yeah, I think so" she states as she bends to remove her chucks from her feet, placing them next to her door as she pads the rest of the way into her room.

It's not much. But, to El it's her one of her few places of solace that she has found over the years. Thankfully, when she and Kali had first arrived in NYC they had stumbled upon the decrepit mattress warehouse, and had eventually met the others of their gang. The best part of the warehouse was the fact that they all managed to have their own very comfortable mattresses.

El had elected for a queen for her room, seeming that it was just herself and Veda, who always curled up at the end of the bed.

Over the years El had acquired a numerous amount of random items that lay scattered about her room. Her most prized possession was her ten inch television that sat next to her bed, and the barely workable VHS player.

El swiped movies here and there to add to her collection during her outings, it was the one thing that always drew her to steal, even though it was the one thing she dreaded doing most in her life.

"What should we watch tonight?" El turned to her companion who

was already curled up on her usual spot on the bed. Her mouth widened in a yawn, and El couldn't help but do so in return.

"Hmm, whatever you want, I'm tired, and I know you are too" Veda spoke evenly to her. El huffed. It was the one thing about being able to talk to your own soul, it knew *everything* about you. Being connected in every way, Anima's knew when their companion was sick, angry, sad, tired, anything that their human felt. So, it made hiding feelings nearly impossible.

Not that El minded much, it was nice having *one* thing in this world to be able to talk to, you truly were never alone.

However, as El turned to her quite decent movie collection, ignoring her Anima, her eyes flicked through her stack and landed on her favorite movie. She smiled as she pulled it from her stack.

El stared at the well worn VHS box as she murmurs the title to herself, "*The Princess Bride*" she sighs as she flicks on her television, removes the movie from the box, and places it into her VHS player.

El moves about her room as she sheds her heavy black jacket from her shoulders and prepares herself for bed. Dressing in an oversized *Star Wars* t-shirt she had swiped a couple years ago from a clothing store, and a pair of sleeping shorts. She swipes her hand through her slicked back hair, and grimaces, making a mental note that she will need to shower in the morning. But, the exhaustion of the day eventually takes over, so she tucks herself under her sheets, reaches forwards and gives sleeping Veda a quick goodnight pet, as she turns her attention towards her television set.

A sigh escaped her mouth as she watches the movie plays out in front of her. She's seen it a hundred times, but, for El, who had never experienced anything like what Buttercup and Westley share, it secretly makes her heart sing.

She can feel the longing, the wanting that stirs in her chest as she tries to imagine what it would be like to have someone like that by her side. Someone she can cuddle close to, feel their warmth, maybe even kiss. The thought causes El to shut her eyes, trying to imagine exactly how it would feel, and without even realizing it, she stumbles

into sleep.

Everything is white. The floors, the ceiling, the walls, an endless abyss that is her life. It's her everyday normal, she doesn't know that there is anything more than what she already knows.

She has her own room that matches everything else. However, the one thing that sticks out in the room is her only companion. Her young Anima is curled up at the foot of her bed. A very tiny brown mouse is curled up and it makes her smile.

She sits in boredom, day after day, as she awaits her door to be open. Only leaving when he needs her.

Today is like no other, and as she sits curled up with fear, she can only imagine the torture that will come of today.

Eventually, she hears the locks becoming unlatched as two large men, also dressed in white approach her, stepping aside to let another man with frosty white hair to enter. But, he is dressed in black.

She feigns a smile when he approaches her, "Hello, Papa" she greets, and he gives her an icy smile in return.

"Good morning Eleven, it's time for your tests" he says disdainfully, his own partner, a steely white weasel sits curled around his neck and El feels the pit in her stomach grow.

Years. For years, this had become her normal. It sickened her each day.

Before she could even speak, the man reached forward and grabbed her companion. El watched in horror as she felt the panic rise within her, within Veda. It was almost an unspoken truth about the world: no one should ever touch their companion. But, for El, it was almost the norm, she had begun to go numb when she felt Veda being held in the hand of her captor.

She knew better than to say anything as the man grabbed the squealing mouse. El's eyes widened as she met her partners sad eyes. Both could feel the dark dreadeness that set in as he held tight to Veda. They both knew they couldn't do anything, so Veda settled.

"Come, Eleven" Papa ordered and El stood, her hospital gown flowing against her knees as she rose to her feet and somberley followed. Her socked feet meeting the cold tiled floor.

The pain is agonizing, as she writhes against the cool floor beneath her.

"Stop! STOP IT!" she bellows, her screams reaching nobody's ears as the immense shock wave hits her again and again.

Her breath is labored as the shocks do finally stop, as El tries to steady herself on the slick floor.

Beads of sweat trickle down her shaved head and move tepidly down her face. Her arms shake as she tries to push herself upwards. She barely stands to her feet as she casts a forlorn glance through the window to her left, where she can see Veda is panting as well. A man in white stands before her companion, a cattle prod held securely in his grasp.

El's shoulders rise and fall heavily as she glared at the man who had been torturing her companion, herself. For, it was one thing for a human to feel pain, and for their Anima to feel that same pain as well. But, when an Anima got hurt, the pain for the human was tenfold.

She turned to the man who stood before her. The man glowered at her, "Now, Eleven, we've been over this before, you can do what I ask or-" and as he turns to look at Veda he nods to the man standing over her companion, he brings the cattle prod close.

"NO! No!" she turns back to the man before him, she reaches out her hands, pleading for him to stop.

He gives her a look. "Then, do what I ask" his voice drips with venom as he bows over her. Even at fifteen, El still feels small for her age, and even more so in the presence of this man. The man she has grown to loath.

"Okay...okay" her words dying against her lips, tears streaming down her face as she turns to her right, another window, however, she knows this one is two way. She can see through it, but the scared girl on the other side can't.

"Alright Eleven, try it again, and this time-" he pauses and whispers into

her ear, his breath against her, "Don't go easy on number Eight," he moves away and more tears stream out of Eleven's eyes as she turns to face the girl who had become like a sister to her as they lived out their lives in their own living Hell.

She can see that Eight is shaking terribly. She's tied to a chair, a cloth wrapped around her mouth, a small rabbit is held by restraints before her.

El can't help but shiver as she raises her hand and aims her powers at the rabbit before her. It begins to squeal, and in retrospect, so does Eight.

The screams reverberate over and over again.

El shoots up from her bed like a rocket, she's gasping for breath and in an instant, Veda is up and doing the same.

"El, are you okay?" she asks as she approaches her. El nods as she tries to calm her breathing, closing her eyes.

"It's just a dream...it's just a dream" she tries to settle herself, however, she knows the mantra is pointless because she knows the truth: her dream wasn't just a made up story her mind wanted to contort, but it was an actual memory, one she'd like to forget, but never can.

Veda moves and nudges El's hand and El welcomes her connection. Something about the reconnection always settling her.

"I'm right here" Veda coos to her, and El nods sighing as she settles back down.

"I just...I just want this to be over" El can feel the tears begin to prick at the corner of her eyes. And Veda moves to lick them away.

"It is over. We escaped the lab *years* ago" Veda tries to reassure El, who only nods, but there's something deep in her mind, something about the dream that silently haunts her.

'*What if it isn't over?*' her inner mind speaks. And El can only cry as she allows her fears to overwhelm her. Veda her only source of comfort.

June 12th, 1993

He's *very* late, and he's pretty sure that his boss is going to ream him out the second he walks through the door. Or, more so *run* through the door because that's what he's currently doing right now as he tries to fasten his tie as he ungracefully tries to weave through the busy streets of NYC.

"Mike come on!" his Anima before him barks back at him as Mike desperately tries to keep up with his four legged companion.

"You've...got...four legs...Pitch!" Mike struggles to bite back at the midnight black wolf that is ten paces ahead of them. Mike can feel their connection ebbing, being too far apart always causing uncertainty and panic to well up within him.

So, Mike picks up his pace and tries to keep a shorter distance between them.

"Hey watch it!" a disgruntled man who Mike almost takes out with his briefcase yells at him as he sprints by. "Sorry!" Mike calls back to the man, but puts his attention forward.

Coming to a sudden halt as the next intersection between 16th and 15th avenue is blocked by a crowd of people waiting for the cross walk sign to turn white.

Finally catching up to his Anima, Mike can feel their connection stitch back together, and he feels the anxiety melt away. He takes a minute to catch his breath, bending over slightly.

Pitch looks to him, he almost smiles, "You'd think with those long legs of yours you'd be able to keep up" he taunts and Mike rolls his eyes.

"Just because I have long legs doesn't mean I'm fast".

Pitch scoffs, "Whatever you say", and the moment the crosswalk light flashes white, he is off again.

Mike sighs as he once again streams a numerous amounts of

apologies as he squeezes by other pedestrians.

Finally, a large grey building comes into view and Mike turns quickly towards it, Pitch right on his heels as they all but smash through the glass door.

Mike lets out a long breath as he collapses, placing his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. He casts a forlorn glance at his watch which reads 7:58, he just *barely* made it with two minutes to spare.

"Mike, come on, elevator!" Pitch barks at him and Mike slumps as he races towards the elevator, which is quickly filling with other people. Mike slinks in with Pitch, his co-workers eyed him warily, but Mike pays no mind to them as he reaches forward and pushes the button labeled 11, and the elevator shoots upwards.

When the elevator pings at floor number 11, Mike exits as if he didn't just race to work because his stupid alarm clock didn't go off like it was supposed to. And literally awakening thirty minutes before he needed to get to work. He tried to air out his now very sweaty business jacket, all while trying to dampen down his already outrageous curly hair. But, he could never get the black mop of hair to settle down, so he figured it wouldn't even matter.

Yet, he's still trying to flatten it as he walks into the office, where his two of his three best friends stood, talking aimlessly as they wait for him.

When Mike enters the office, his friends look at him with knowing looks.

"What?" Mike tries to feign innocence as he sets his briefcase down at one of the spots available at the long wooden table.

Lucas rolls his eyes as his arms crossed in front of his chest. "You were almost late" he states.

The other man beside him nods his very curly hair, "Yeah Mike, what were you out partying or something?" he teases.

Mike scoffs, "No, Dustin, I've been up late working on this stupid

proposal and I didn't set my alarm".

"Yeah, I had to wake him, nearly licked him to death" Pitch jumps in and both Dustin and Lucas laugh at him.

"That sounds just like how I have to wake Dustin every morning", a gruff voice causes Mike to look up at Dustin's Anima, a Spanish water dog, who has placed his front paws up on the desk.

"Dart, seriously!" Dustin pushes at his companion slightly as the two get into a playful push and shove competition.

"Come on you two, don't you three have to get set up?" Lucas's much more rational Anima jumps onto the table with ease eyeing the three of them.

"Nam's right, let's get this bad boy set up" Lucas says clapping his hands together as he reaches for Nam, a red panda Anima, who climbs effortlessly onto his shoulder.

And with some shuffling and slight bickering, the three friends eventually get their proposal set up, and no sooner do they complete it, does their boss walk through the door.

Mike spins on his feet to get a look at his boss. Mr. Curo is a large thick man, who tends to have a no-nonsense attitude, he is followed closely by his companion, Tuso, a very large warthog. The Anima's stench alone could empty a room. But, Mike had become somewhat accustomed to the putrid stank. Pitch, not so much, as he tended to cower away to the furthest corner of the room to avoid the stench.

Mike, Lucas and Dustin had been working for him for almost two years now, and he had finally stopped referring to them as '*hey you*', and had *almost* gotten their names down, but Mike still internally cringed each time he said-

"Mitchell, Luke, Dalton" Mr. Curo nods to the three of them, and Mike almost has to laugh. He's definitely getting closer, but he still finds it a bit ridiculous he couldn't get their names. But, with his *very* decent paycheck he received from the man, Mike chose not to complain.

"Mr. Curo" all three of them say together, bowing slightly as the man

enters the room as he plops himself down on one of the available office chairs. The leather chair groans under his weight, but he forces it to tilt back as he eyes the three of them warily.

"Okay boys, let's see what you've got" he nods to them, waiting for them to begin.

At this Mike steps forward, loading the start of his presentation as he points towards the screen before him.

"So, this is what we have in mind" Mike begins and it's as if the rest of the world melts away.

It takes hours for Mike, Lucas and Dustin to explain their new product idea to Mr. Curo, who throws in his own remarks and questions along the way. All three of them jumping in at the correct times.

By the end, the work day is just about over, and Mike can feel his stomach growling with hunger. Mr. Curo was a well known figure, and this was why he didn't cut any edges and made sure everything was as perfect as possible. If that meant taking hours upon hours to do so, then that's what had to be done.

When all was said and done Mr. Curo nodded at the three of them. "Well, you boys definitely did some top notch work here. This new toy and product placement could be just what this company needs".

Mike flicks his eyes to Lucas and Dustin who seem to be holding back their excitement. *Months* of hardwork and dedication had gone into this plan. All three of them had attended business college together. Little did they know they would all get hired at the same company. It was a large toy manufacturing company and one of the first endeavors the three of them had been given was to try to come up with something new. Something that wasn't what every child had.

And for the three of them, who grew up with all the nerdiest toys and games possible, they seemed perfect for this job.

So, with a praise from Mr. Curo, it was like all their hard work had

finally paid off.

"I really like where you were going with this" he nods his head once again. And at this Mike lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"But-" and this is where Mike internally cringed, he *really* didn't like that word.

"There's something missing" he taps his large finger on his chin. "You've got the standpoint, a direction to go and a promoting factor".

"But?" Dustin speaks, not being left on the edge. Mr. Curo raises and eyebrow at the three of them.

"But, you need more depth, more angle, you boys are almost there. I'll give you another week and I'm sure you'll get it figured out by them" he gives them a bright smile, and Mike's pretty sure his mouth drops open to the floor in shock.

Mr. Curo looks at his wrist watch, "Well, look at the time, I've got to go, same time next week gentlemen?" he gives them all a look and the three of them barely manage to nod.

"Good!" Mr. Curo chirps as he heads out of the conference room, Tuso following close by. The second the elevator doors shut, Dustin turns to Mike and Lucas.

"You've *got* to be shitting me!" he cries out in desperation flopping down onto the table before him. Mike flumps into another seat, feeling exactly the same way.

"What the hell guys, this is crazy" Lucas groans into his hands.

"This first design took us months. *Months!*" Dustin stresses. "Now he expects us to have a new angle by a week!?"

Mike sighs and ruffles his disheveled hair. He's completely frustrated by the turn of events, and he's not really sure what to do. But, Mr. Curo had *liked* their idea, he just wanted more, so that's what they're going to have to give him.

So, with bated breath, Mike stands and turns to his friends. "We're just going to have to stay and plan things out" he sighs, Lucas and Dustin give him incredulous looks.

"Dude, I've got to meet up with Max. We're supposed to be checking out a venue" Lucas stresses.

Mike nods at this. Max was their fiery redheaded friend that they had met in their college days and was currently Lucas's fiancée. She and Lucas hadn't hit it off immediately, but within a couple months things changed between them and they were almost inseparable. She, like Lucas, had an Anima in the form of a red panda. Mike had always had some jealousy towards them because they were soulmates.

Nobody knew why, but for some reason when soulmates met, their Anima's would take their forever form. For, since Mike had known Lucas since childhood, he had watched his friend's Anima change multiple times, just as Pitch had.

When Lucas met Max, his Anima had taken the form of a large black panther. While hers was a brilliant red tabby. However, the more time they spent together, their Anima's eventually settled on their form of a red panda.

Honestly, no one really knew why it happened, or how to tell if someone is your soulmate. Because Mike remembers one day Max and Lucas's Anima's had been their usual forms, and the next day they had settled. Truthfully, it had surprised them as well.

But, when Mike saw the two together, he could see how different they were, yet how they uniquely balanced each other out. It was pretty rare to see a couple who had matching Anima's. And most didn't really seem to care that their Anima's didn't settle, that truthfully they weren't soulmates.

It was a truth that many lived with and were okay with. For Mike, it was something he *truly* wanted. He didn't want some frivolous relationships that didn't mean anything. The guys had always ragged on him that he had to get to know someone before their Anima's would settle anyways, so why not get out there?

He had tried going out on a couple of dates, to pacify his friends, but they never went past the first one. He never felt that connection he was looking for, the one that would be there when he *knew* he found his true soulmate. And if that meant looking forever, then so be it.

Shaking his head from his thoughts, Mike nods to his friend, "It's okay Lucas, Dustin and I will start and we will catch up tomorrow".

Lucas seems relieved by Mike's statement, while Dustin falters. "Why does he get to leave?" he whines, and Mike sees Dart pull the same sad, pathetic face.

Mike rolls his eyes, "It's just for tonight, we *have* to come up with something" he stresses. Dustin sighs and slumps his shoulders.

"Fine. But we need sustenance first!" he all but yells as he heads to his bag and ruffles for his wallet and heads to the door, right behind Lucas.

"Where are you going?" Mike asks dejectedly and Dustin wiggles his wallet in the air, "Going to get us some food, be right back!" he yells over his shoulder as Mike watches both of his friends go, shaking his head.

"Well, that went well" Pitch states looking up at him, Mike huffs at him as he turns to settle into his seat, looking over their proposal one last time before running a hand through his hair. "It's going to be a long night".

June 12th, 1993

El can't seem to shake the feeling that has settled like a pit in her stomach after her vivid dream the other night. She feels as if she's on edge no matter where she is. Whether she's tucked safely in her room, or out roaming the streets, there's a small nagging that sits in the back of her mind, and it won't go away.

She eventually decides to approach Kali about the situation. But, as always she merely scoffs at El's fears.

"Jane, we escaped the lab *six* years ago" Kali stresses to her as she

lazes about in one of the chairs. Funshine and Mick sit beside her, each smoking a cigarette.

El rolls her eyes at her, "I've told you *not* to call me Jane".

Kali eyes her, "It's what your mother called you", her voice is cool, El tightens her stare. "I don't care, I go by El" she states firmly, folding her arms over her chest.

The older girl rolls her eyes at her, "Whatever, but either way, there's no one looking for us, how would Brenner have even found us? We ran away from Indiana, now we're here" she states firmly.

El lets out a breath, "You *know* he'll never stop looking for us" her voice is firm.

Kali shakes her head, rising from her seat as she begins to remove Ros from around her neck and sets her onto the table. She moves around the object and comes to stand before El, their eyes meeting.

Even though El was a couple years younger than Kali, she was still a half inch taller, which El was secretly happy about.

The woman before El fixed her with a steely look as she points a dirty finger into her face, "Nothing...is going...to happen" she wags her finger in the middle of El's face. But El doesn't focus on the finger, instead she doesn't take her eyes off of Kali's.

El smacks Kali's hand away from her face and moves past her, heading towards her room.

"What are you going to do, run away!?" Kali yells to El's retreating form, who half hears her, all she wants to do is curl up in her room and wished she had a normal life. A life where she wasn't raised in a lab, where she wasn't used like some weapon, one where she had *actual* friends. *Love*, her heart whispered, but she pushed that deep down.

For now, El slammed her room shut with a wave of her hand, her powers allowing for a much more residual 'THUD' that echoed throughout the warehouse. El's back to the door, she slid down the metal object and tucked her knees up to her chest and allowed the

tears to come.

Eventually Veda's soft voice broke through her sadness, "El", her companion whispered. And when El looked up to see Veda, she could see the tears sparkling in her eyes as well. So, El dropped her knees and held out her arms, Veda pouncing into her embrace immediately, as they both comforted one another, trying to forget the sadness that enveloped them.

Night had eventually settled through the warehouse and El had tucked herself into her bed, falling asleep once again to watch another one of her favorite movies, '*Star Wars*'. She never understood her fascination by the movies, but she loved to watch them anyways.

After spending a couple of hours curled into a ball and trying to contain her tears, sleep eventually took her. She hoped far away from the things around her. But, she had not expected to be awoken by Veda forcefully pawing at her.

"El, El, wake-up, NOW!" her small companion cried, and El, her eyes heavy with sleep rose slowly from her bed. "Veda, what's going on?" she said through half closed eyes.

"Shh, listen," she said, as her radar like ears flicked this way and that.

El wasn't sure if it was because her Anima had taken the form of a fox, but for some reason, just like Veda, El's hearing was much more adept than an average human. So, closing her eyes, El listened and that's when she heard the screams echoing through the warehouse.

The hair on El's neck stood on edge, she moved her head quickly to Veda, "We need to go, NOW!" she yelled as she managed to grab her rucksack as she began to move around her room as she began to stuff her worn bag with a handful of clothes. She knew she needed to only take the necessities, but something wouldn't let her leave without snagging her copy of '*The Princess Bride*' from her nearby night stand.

"Come on" she whispered hastily as she ducked down by her door and slowly opened it using her powers.

She slowly poked her head out from the space and looked about, it was very dark in the warehouse, and El couldn't see anything. So, timidly she tiptoed out from around the door, she peeked down and around the staircase. But, just as she does so, a hand goes across her mouth.

El wants to scream, but she immediately sees that it's Kali, and she's giving her a look. Even though El's heart is pounding against her ribcage, she relaxes slightly.

"What was that screaming?" El whispered and Kali shook her head, "Don't know, but it sounded like Dottie".

El nods in agreement. Kali begins to move towards the staircase, the only way out of the warehouse and El follows slowly.

Each sound that echoes makes them look this way and that. They finally make it down the stairs, when out of the corner of her eye, El sees something flash. She's not sure what it is, but it makes her yell out, "GET DOWN!" as she grabs onto Kali and pulls her down.

And no sooner did they duck, does the sound of bullets fill the warehouse.

"It's them, I TOLD you!" El cries as she and Kali begins to move. "Where is everyone else?" El cries and Kali shakes her head. "I don't know, they sleep on the bottom floor maybe they-" Kali freezes the moment they exit the warehouse, because to El's utter shock, they're surrounded by multiple men, all pointing guns at them.

"Freeze!" one of them yells.

El's pretty sure her stomach sinks at this moment. "No", her heart whimpers, and that's when Kali steps in front of her. El turns to look at her, "Kali" El whispers but the girl shakes her head, "Get out of here, I'll hold them off," she says a determined look on her face.

El places her hand on Kali's shoulder, "No...no, I can help, I can-" but then Kali looks at her square in the face and she gives her a tender smile, "I need to help the others, you need to be kept safe, one of us does" she pleads.

She feels herself shaking her head at Kali's words, "No...Kali" she can feel the tears prickling at the corner of her eyes.

"We've got you surrounded!" one of the gunman cries as the guns are all pointed at them.

El watches as Kali concentrates, she's not sure what's she's making the gunman see, but all of their heads go upwards, looking high above them. Some of them shooting off their guns.

"RUN!" Kali yells at her, and even though El wants to stay, wants to help fight, she knows she can't. So, with one last look at her sister, El moves away and takes off on a run, Veda at her heels.

El's not sure what time it is, but the streets are nearly bare, but that doesn't stop her from running with all her might. She hears more gunshots and her tears fall quickly, trailing behind her as she runs.

"Come on El!" Veda cries as her small four legs carry her as if she's flying.

El swallows her tears and doesn't stop, she barely looks to cross the intersection, knowing that she just needs to get out of there. Away from the bad men.

She can't help but take a sparing look over her shoulder, a bit of relief rushes through her as she doesn't see anyone coming after her. But, it causes her to not pay attention to what's ahead of her.

And just as she's turning to face forward again, she knocks into something, **hard**, she has no idea what it is, but she knocks into it forcefully. A swirl of emotions hit her as she catapults over the object and lands roughly onto the pavement.

Someone cries out, a howl echoed through the night, and a shooting pain rises up through El's leg, she can't move.

Mike rubs at his tired eyes as the light from a nearby lamp flickers slightly. He turns to gaze at the lamp and sees the clock that lingers above it.

12:38, he reads and he sighs pushing himself away from the table and the scattered papers that litter it. Dustin and Dart had left nearly two hours ago, he had encouraged Mike to do so as well, but Mike felt that he needed to make sure their new idea was more concrete than the last.

He'd rather spend one entire night thinking it over than trying to spend days ailing over it. So, Mike elected to stay, and he felt more comfortable with what he and Dustin had come up with. He could feel his eyes drooping, trying to stay awake.

He turned his head over to Pitch, who was curled up in a tight ball, snoring slightly.

Mike lets out a puff of air, chuckling at his companion. "He's got the right idea" Mike mutters under his breath.

So, reluctantly, and with his bed calling out to him three blocks away, Mike packs up all of his papers and shuffles them into his brief case. Once he has it closed he turns back to Pitch, "Hey, sleeping beauty, let's go".

And as if on command, Pitch raises his head quickly, their matching dark eyes meet one another. Pitch lets out a long yawn as he rises to his feet and stretches out his front paws, "Finally, thought you were going to pull an all nighter" he says sleepily.

Mike rolls his eyes, "Yeah, I thought so too, but I can barely keep my eyes open, let's head home".

Pitch merely nods and follows Mike obediently out from the office door as they head to the elevator. Mike presses the button for the ground floor and the machine comes to life.

Mike lets out a breath of relief as they step out of the elevator and head towards the door. He can see through the glass windows that the streets seem pretty bare, which isn't a surprise, but he's silently happy, not enjoying the usual hustle and bustle that is NYC.

What Mike doesn't expect though is that the second he pushes open the glass door, allowing Pitch to exit first is to hear a peculiar noise

that sounds like popping. Mike steps outside the door, freezing, listening to the noise.

But, as Pitch continues forward, Mike doesn't even register someone who's barreling down the street.

Mike barely has time to register what happens when, quite quickly, he feels a jolt of panic rise through him. He flicks his head quickly to Pitch, but as he does so, a figure just about steamrolls into his companion.

The wind was knocked out of him in an instant as he crumples to the concrete beneath him, his briefcase skittering out of his grasp. He hears someone cry out and land roughly, and, he can feel a deep pain resonating from Pitch.

It wasn't something that happened often. But, Mike like the rest of the population knew that the pain an Anima experienced, was experienced ten times that by their human. And even though Mike believes that the figure didn't knock into Pitch *too* harshly, it still hurt like hell.

Mike looks over to Pitch who is laying on the pavement, and he can feel his companion trying to catch his breath in which Mike was currently trying to do as well.

After a moment he hastily stands to his feet and makes his way over to Pitch, he places a gentle hand on his dark fur. "You okay?" he asks and Pitch nods, "Yeah, nothing worse than wear" he almost chuckles and then turns his head, in which Mike follows.

Both of their eyes land on the figure who is about ten feet away, Mike can see that they are writing in pain.

"Go see if they're okay" Pitch turns his head to look Mike directly in his eye, Mike has to laugh because that was exactly what he was *planning* on doing, but was hesitant. Pitch always knew this and was his voice of reassurance.

So, with shaky legs Mike lifts himself from his kneeling position and makes his way over to the figure. His pain slowly fading.

He makes his way over to the figure and bends down, they're trying to sit up, but they cry out in pain.

Mike reaches a gentle hand out and places it on the person's shoulder. The person nearly jumped out of their skin when they realize he is behind them.

They, or should he say *she*, cries out in pain as she reaches down to her leg.

"Hey, hey, it's okay I'm not going to hurt you" Mike tries to sympathize with the very scared woman in front of him.

The woman hesitantly looks at him, in the dim glow of the streetlights he can see tears streaming down her face, and his heart breaks.

She turns away hastily, and Mike looks down at her leg, he can't help but grimace.

He can see that her black jeans are torn, and there's blood stains starting to appear. He huffs moving towards her, she flinches again.

"No" she says, sniffing. And then he notices a growling beside him. He turns and sees the girl's Anima, a beautiful fox, who although isn't bleeding like the girl, is limping with the same leg as the girl that is injured.

Mike knows this happens sometimes. It seemed that when a human got hurt, their Anima would feel the same pain as them and sometimes exhibit similar pain. Where, when an Anima was hurt, it was quite different.

"Stay away!" the Anima growled at him, and Mike held up his hands in defense.

"I'm not going to hurt either of you, but she's definitely hurt and in a lot of pain" Mike says gesturing to the girl. "Let me call an ambulance or-"

"NO!" both the girl and Anima growl at him and Mike's more confused than ever.

Then, a pregnant silence falls upon them, but it doesn't last long as another stream of popping is heard.

Mike turns his head towards the sound, slightly confused.

And then, he hears shuffling behind him. He spins on his feet and sees the panic in the girls eyes as she desperately tries to stand, her small little Anima trying desperately to help, but she's failing to.

"We need to go" she tries to get to her feet, but Mike can see that her leg is nowhere near useful.

So, Mike hurries to the girls side once again. And she flinches when he reaches out towards him, he huffs, "Look, I don't know what's going on, or why you're so scared, but I'm just trying to help, I'm not going to hurt you" he pleads to the girl.

He can see her slicked back hair is starting to fall from it's held place as it sticks to her sweaty face. And then, their eyes meet, and even in the dim glow of light around them, Mike can't help but be mesmerized by the amber glow they have.

And, there's almost something there, and Mike tries to show her that he's someone who's safe.

She hesitates, but another loud popping noise comes from behind them. She huffs, "Okay" she says and Mike relaxes.

He moves, bending down to the girls side as he gently reaches for her right arm, tossing it over his shoulder, while he uses his left arm to wrap it gingerly around her waist. He then hoists her from the ground with all his might.

She lets out a muffled scream.

"Sorry, sorry, I know it's going to hurt" he tries to reassure the girl as he adjusts her so that he can bare the brunt of the weight between them.

He turns, "I'm taking you to the hospital it's-" he starts but the girl frantically shakes her head, "No...no hospital" her breath is tight.

Mike sighs, '*Then where's he supposed to bring her?!*' he thinks to himself, and that's when Pitch arrives at his side.

He looks down at his companion, and the wolf look him directly in the eyes as he does so. Mike knows *exactly* what he's thinking and he huffs.

"Mike, we have to" Pitch states firmly.

And even though Mike wants to protest, he knows his Anima is right. So with a sigh he turns his head towards the girl.

"Okay, no hospital. My apartment is three blocks away, I'll bring you there" he states firmly, getting ready to not take 'no' for an answer.

He can feel the girl tense beside him, but then she looks down at her Anima. And as if they have their own private conversation as well. The girl softens in his grasp.

"Okay" she whispers and Mike lets out a breath of relief.

He adjusts them slightly, "Alright then, this isn't going to be easy, but we'll take it slow".

The girl only nods, he can see the pain etched across her face, and his heart breaks for her.

He starts to move, Pitch right by his side, they only make it a couple paces, when the girl yelps, "Wait, stop!" and she turns her head slightly, and Mike follows her motion.

His eyes fall on her Anima, who is limping, and isn't making any progress in walking. Mike immediately turns to Pitch, who is already on it he stoops low, "Here, climb on" he says gesturing to his back.

The foxes eyes go wide, and this didn't surprise Mike in the slightest. When Anima's touched, a connection forms between them. The only problem is, no one knows if the connection will be good or bad. So, most Anima's kept their distances from one another, just as humans try to keep their distance from other people's Anima's.

Mike can feel the girl he's holding up shudder lightly, and he gets it,

Pitch has *never* touched another Anima before, other than his sisters and parents, but that's different. This girl is a total stranger, he has no idea what could happen.

And before the fox can say anything, Pitch makes the decision and moves his large muzzle and grabs ahold of the foxes scruff gently and places her behind his back.

An intense feeling surges through him, it's something he's never experienced before. And he's pretty sure the girl feels it too. It's indescribable, the feeling that overwhelms him. It's almost as if he can sense the girls emotions.

There's fear, dancing with sadness and uncertainty. But, what catches him, is that there's something buried deep beneath, an inviting warmth, almost like a moth drawn to a flame.

However, Mike feels like the moth as he for some reason has a new urge to get closer to this girl. But then she looks at him and their eyes meet. He's not sure if she's feeling exactly what he is, but he can see a blush forming on her soft cheeks.

She's a stranger, he reminds himself. So, while placing these new feelings aside he shifts once again.

"Alright, let's get moving" and without another spoken breath between any of them. Mike teeters forward and heads towards his apartment.

Okay, what do you guys think? Should I continue this, because honestly it will probably be shorter than my other fics, so I could get it done on the "quicker" side and I have an idea where I want to go.

Also, what did you think of the animal pairings? I really enjoyed researching that XD

But, I'd like you're honest opinions on this and I don't want people to get mad at me for not updating *Watching Her Fall In Love*, but I kinda need a little break from it and I love fantasy, so this is right up my alley.

So, as always please review and thanks for reading!

2. A Connection

Thank you for the lovely reviews! I truly appreciate them and I'm happy to read that many of you are enjoying this story! I'm having a lot of fun writing it!

So, let's continue...

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or His Dark Materials

June 13th, 1993

He has *no idea* what's gotten into him. His breath comes in quick and ragged as he supports most of the girl's weight who hangs loosely off to his side.

They've managed to hobble two blocks, with only one to go, but for Mike it feels like an eternity. He can hear the girl's sharp intake of breath as they gingerly make their way to his apartment.

As discreetly as he can, Mike tries to observe the girl from out of the corner of his eye. But, he finds this incredibly challenging when his mop of black hair falls sweatily in his face, and he can see that hers is doing the same.

He just barely catches her wincing as they step off the curb as they approach 11th street.

"Almost there" he tries to encourage the girl, who doesn't respond to his gentle coaxing. Not that he blames her. For, ever since Pitch had placed the girl's Anima on him, he can feel the anxiety and fear that swirls within her. It's incredibly powerful the emotions he feels as they remained connected.

Weirdly enough though, it doesn't bother him. Of course, it's almost near impossible to not go your whole life and *not* touch another person's Anima. It usually happened on accident. But, those times where you are connected to a person, a random stranger, you never know what you may get, so it's best to be avoided at all cost.

But now, as the fox Anima lay purely connected to his own soul,

there's something there that keeps stirring, and it entices him to probe further. Yet, he keeps that feeling holed up inside himself, because he knows it's wrong, and right now he *should* be focusing on getting this poor girl to safety and taken care of.

A pit sinks into his stomach at this thought. He knows Pitch can feel his hesitancy because he can feel the wolf's dark eyes keep flicking over to him, but for some reason, he feels like he can trust the girl. Even though he didn't even know her name.

Finally, the large apartment complex finally comes into view and Mike inwardly sighs in relief. He brings them to a slow as he adjusts his grip around the girl, settling his arm around her waist instead. Her eyes immediately flick to his and they meet once again.

He can feel it, and he's pretty sure she can too. But, another wisp of pain encroaches on her face, and he knows it's something he'll have to ask about later.

"Alright. This is it, we're almost there" he tells the girl and she merely nods, her breaths coming quicker and tighter.

Mike moves towards the lobby door, and pushes it open, allowing for Pitch to go first as he just about stumbles through trying to support the girl. He stops short and looks over to the front desk where the night manager usually sits.

Mike sighs in relief to see that he's not there so, he sucks in a lung full of air and powers forward towards the elevator. The girl lets out a soft groan, and he mumbled a hasty apology.

He punches at the elevator button much more than necessary, but truthfully he doesn't want anyone to see him. He has met a good chunk of his neighbors, and it would look incredibly weird for Mike to not only be bringing home a girl, but one who was fairly hurt as well.

Finally, the elevator dings and Mike steps inside, Pitch following in turn. He reaches forward and pushes floor 15, and within moments they're off.

The girl seems to take this moment to lean even more heavily into his side, and Mike can't help but blush at the contact. He's never been this close to a woman in his life and it's an interesting experience to say the least.

Pitch raises an eyebrow at him and Mike rolls his eyes.

The elevator finally pings at the 15th floor and Mike hobbles out with the girl. He's *very* thankful in this moment that his door is only three down as he approaches it.

Not very smoothly Mike fishes for his key in his now bloodstained jacket. And once it's finally retrieved he opens up his apartment door and flicks on the lights.

He's pretty sure all of them blink in the new brightness. Mike hurries over to his worn clothed couch where he finally settles the girl onto the cushions.

She winces and lets out a strangled breath as she leans back, her body contorting from pain.

"Easy, easy, it's going to be okay" Mike reaches out and touches the girls arm. She slowly opens her eyes and she meets his. It's then that he notices he can't feel her emotions anymore and turns to see that Pitch has placed the fox on his nearby loveseat. The second Pitch moves away, it's almost like a warmth disappears inside him. He almost wants to tell Pitch to stay by her side, to do *something* to feel that connection again.

But, he bites his tongue and turns back to the girl. She hasn't stopped looking at him.

Even though their souls aren't connected, he can see the fear and uncertainty written across her face. She's in pain, and she's in a strangers house.

Mike huffs reaching out to the girl again. She flinches slightly at the touch, but she allows him to keep his hand there.

"I'll be right back, let me go grab some supplies" he says as earnestly as possible. It takes her a moment but the girl nods.

Mike smiles in relief as he stands and moves towards his bedroom and bathroom where he knows his medkit lies. Pitch is hot on his heels.

Even though he knows *exactly* where his medkit is. He stops in the middle of the bathroom and allows himself to stare at his reflection in the mirror.

His hair is a wild curly mess, even more so than usual, he's got some dirt and blood caked onto his face and his suit is a complete mess. But, what also meets him is his eyes, he can feel the fear start to build within *him*.

Pitch nudges him with his wet nose, "We have to do it Mike" he starts, and Mike doesn't look at him.

He knows what his companion says is true, but just as the fear he felt from the girl, he feels it himself.

"What if...what if she tells someone..." his voice is flat.

Pitch huffs, "Then we'll move" he states plainly and Mike whips his head to look at the wolf who only has a teasing half smile played out on the wolf's lips.

"But...I don't think we'll have to worry...I know you felt it too", Pitch looks at him knowingly.

Mike nods at this. He did, he had felt it. Something familiar stirred within the girl that stirs within himself and he feels like he needs to make sure she's okay.

So, Mike bends down and fishes out his medkit, a washcloth and a container that he fills with water. With one last look at Pitch, they both nod to one another and head back out into the living room.

She's in excruciating pain. Not that she's ever not felt overwhelming pain in her life, no, she was no stranger to it, but this was different. This was the type of pain that only occurred when you got physically hurt, something that doesn't often happen to her.

Her entire leg was on fire, but her knee was also throbbing, it was almost an impossible task to walk the three blocks that she did in her condition, but, there was something there that she had never experienced before in her life: support.

The moment she realized that she had been rendered helpless when she landed on the pavement and attempted to get up and continue to run was one of the most terrifying moments of her life. What scared her even more was the man and his Anima she had tripped over.

She had never met someone who was so willing to help her, a complete stranger.

Even though she widely protested, she knew she was being stupid, she couldn't move, and neither could Veda. When she finally got a good look at the man, she saw a spark that glittered in his eyes. It was warm and inviting, safe.

She knew she had to get out of the streets, especially when the gunfire could still be heard only a couple blocks away, so grudgingly she accepted the help of the stranger.

It was one thing to be so close to someone, but a male, this experience was foreign to El. The feeling was somewhat awkward and clumsy. But, everything changed the moment his Anima touched Veda.

It was like lightning rippled through her, and she could feel him in every depth possible. His warmth, his kindness, his caring heart, it was all there, written plainly across his soul. And she couldn't believe what she felt, it overwhelmed her and she almost forgot about her pain.

Then, he looked at her. Even in the darkness that surrounded them, she could see their dark depths, but the warmth that they evoked. She's pretty sure that she was blushing, and turned away hastily, the pain quickly returning.

They then spent the next span of time hobbling as they held onto each other. She more so using him for as much support as possible, as she tried to not pass out from the pain.

Through the small hazes of pain she tried to focus on the feelings that swirled in the man beside her. The awkwardness that he admitted almost made her laugh, she could see the insecurity that bubbled within him. And for some reason, it made him endearing.

She could feel his sensitivity as well, his determination and loyalty. It almost eased her.

When they finally made it to his apartment complex. She took the elevator ride as a way to lean into him more. One, out of sheer tiredness and pain, two, she wanted to see if the closer she got, the more she would feel from him.

But, it was short lived as they once again moved forward and made their way into his apartment.

The bright light caused her to wince as the man guided her to his couch. He laid her down with the gentleness as if she were made of glass. She flinched slightly at his touch, but only because most touch she was used to was connected to pain.

However, the man's eyes were soft, warm and inviting, so she allowed him to remain close to her. And then, she felt their connection slowly diminish and she watched as the man turned his head, and she followed his gaze.

His beautiful black wolf Anima, had gently laid Veda on the other nearby couch. And she silently wished for them to remain connected.

The man however, turned back to her and gave her a soft smile. He told her he would be back shortly. So, she gave him a curt nod and watched him retreat to a nearby room.

Her chest rose and fell quickly as she tried to breath through the pain, but it wasn't really working. She looked over to Veda who returned her soft look.

El closed her eyes, wishing for the pain to subside, she didn't even want to look at it, knowing it was probably pretty bad.

Thankfully though, the man finally returned to the room. She opened her eyes when she heard his footsteps against his wooden floor. She

could see that he was carrying a slew of supplies, she sat up, but he quickly moved towards her.

"Hey, easy, you're going to want to lay back. You've lost some blood, so you might be dizzy" he explained.

She sighed and nodded as he bent down and moved towards her injured leg. He began to reach towards her bloodied and torn jeans when his hands stopped, he cast a look in her direction.

"Is it okay if I..uhm...if I touch you?" he questions, and the second it stumbles from his mouth El watches his cheeks flame instantly, and she can see the smattering of freckles that decorate his cheeks stand out against his fair skin. 'Cute' her brain thinks immediately, and she's pretty sure she's blushing now too, understanding his poor choice of words and the possible double entendre behind them.

He starts waving his hands wildly and she feels a small smile turning up in the corner of her mouth, "No, no, that's *not* what I meant!" he tries to save himself.

"I meant, uhm...you know can I...roll up your pant legs and uh...geez" he shakes his head at his ramblings, and El can't help but giggle.

The sound catches the man as he looks back at her shyly, "It's okay" she says her throat dry, "I get what you mean" she smiles at him.

The man's shoulders relaxed in relief as he gives her a small smile in return. He nods "Okay" he says simply as he reaches forward and pulls at her right pant leg.

"Gah!" she cries out, sitting up unexpectedly clenching her teeth together as the man quickly pulls his hands away.

"I'm sorry, you're pants are tight, I might have to cut them open, is that okay?" he looks at her with his rich brown eyes and El feels herself melting slightly.

She only nods.

The man swallows as he moves to his medkit and she can hear him shuffling around. He turns back to her leg, scissors clenched in his

hand.

With the lightest of touch, the man begins to cut away at her jeans. He moves them slowly up her leg, ending at the base of her thigh, and it's then El's eyes go wide.

The blood is dark and thick, as it continues to leak from the gash that splits her knee cap almost in half. She's pretty sure she should have fainted at the sight, but she feels like she's too stunned to do so.

"Holy shit!" the man grumbles as he begins to blot at the gash on her knee, trying to absorb the blood.

El groans, "That doesn't look good" she simpers.

The man nods, "No. It really doesn't he agrees" and El flops back down onto the pillow behind her.

"This is going to need stitches," the man says a couple moments later and El rises again.

"What!?" she cries, and their eyes meet again.

"I'm sorry...but, it's *really* bad," he says as he continues to blot at the cut as she winces once again at the pain.

El shakes her head, "No...I can't...I can't go to the hospital, they'll-" but she stops short, the man looking at her with a raised brow.

The tears well in her eyes, and she's so overwhelmed she doesn't know what to do. So, she lets them spill as she tries to hide behind her hands.

"El!" she hears Veda cry from across the couch as she whimpers softly.

"El" she hears again, although not from her Anima, but from a male's voice.

She slowly pulls her hands away from her eyes and her eyes meet the man who has moved so that he's now kneeling before her, he's very close.

El notices a soft smile playing across his lips, "El" he says again, "Is that your name?" he questions.

El takes in a deep breath and nods. The man nods his head again, "Well, El, it's nice to meet you, I'm Mike" he holds out a hand, an offering El is not used to.

"Mike" she tests the words out on her tongue, and she loves the way it flows freely and effortlessly from her. Gingerly she reaches forward and takes his hand in hers.

Again, a deep pull, and she meets his eyes yet again. There's something that stirs within them, a bright light she has always searched for. It's trusting and reassuring.

Her small hand feels petite to his large one, but it's comforting.

Mike looks at her. He sighs heavily and then turns to look at his Anima, "Pitch, I don't think we have another option," he says.

El's eyes widen at this, '*What does he mean by that?*', her brain asks quickly. She's not sure why, but when Mike turns back to her, he's smiling, but she can see some hesitancy there as well. Their still holding hands.

His large thumb strokes against her soft skin, she gasps slightly at the sensation.

He looks her square in the eyes. "I'm going to trust you" he starts and El quirks her eyebrow at him.

She can't help but spit out, "What?" feeling very confused, shouldn't *she* be saying that to him?

He gives her a timid look, not really meeting her eyes.

"I'm...I'm going to do something, and it's going to be kind of weird, but..." he turns away and shakes his head.

He lets out a huff of breath, and looks at her again, "But...there's something that tells me I can trust you. You can't tell *anyone* about this...okay?" he gives her a questioning look.

She *really* doesn't understand what's going on, or why Mike is acting so weird all of a sudden. El could tell by the way Mike was twitchy and hesitant that he was about to share something with her that was secret. And boy did she know about secrets.

But, she could tell that he wanted to help, that he had a way to do so, but it wasn't something that was normal.

So, she squeezed his hand, their gazes locked, and she nodded, "I promise to keep your secret Mike".

His face drops and he gives her a wistful look, before nodding, "Promise".

And then, he lets go of her hand and motions with his hand for his Anima to come beside him, which he does.

El watches in fascination as the wolf leans against Mike, as if offering a gentle nudge of encouragement. But, it's when Mike reaches forward and places his hands on El's knee, does she understand.

A warmth surges through her as Mike's hands glow almost white hot, as he shuts his eyes and focuses.

A flash of pain rushes through El and she cries out. But, Mike doesn't stop.

"Aughh!" El cries out and she can feel Veda cowering in pain as well.

The sensation under Mike's hand begins to change, her skin feels tight as almost if it pulls together. Her knee continues to throb as the glow beneath Mike's hand only gets brighter.

She's about to scream for him to stop whatever he's doing when a wash of coolness sweeps over her knee. And then, the pain subsides.

Granted, it still hurts, but not like it had just seconds ago. El's eyes widen as she looks over to Mike who slumps back, breathing heavily. His Anima doing the same.

El bends forward and looks at her knee. The gash is miraculously gone. Almost like magic.

She's baffled and only gapes in shock as she tentatively runs her hands over the now smooth skin, not even a scar to show.

"Feel...better?" Mike pants and El turns her smiling face to him, "Oh my gosh that was-" and then he lifts his head, and a long thin trail of blood trickles from both of his nostrils, pooling at his top lip.

El's eyes widen and she's pretty sure her breath escapes her. Not believing what she's seeing.

Mike seems to notice her look, because he moves and wipes at his nose, his already ruined suit now covered in more of his blood.

He sighs, "Yeah, that happens every time", he looks at his blood spattered coat and then back at her again, however, his face falls in worry when she's pretty sure he sees her reaction.

"Look, I know that was weird and all, and I'm sure you want an explanation, but, honestly I'm not sure myself so I-" but he's immediately cut off by El reaching out to him and grabbing ahold of his hand, shutting him up instantly.

He gives her a curious look, and she only gives him a wistful smile.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes scanning her face.

El only nods in disbelief, "You're like me" is all she whispers as Mike's mouth drops open in shock.

'You're like me' settles into his brain, but he can't seem to wrap his mind around it.

'What does she mean?' he asks himself as his eyes eagerly scan her face for any hint of explanation.

This girl, El, who was a complete stranger not even an hour ago, is saying that she's like him. Does that mean she can heal too?

As if El can read his mind, she shakes her head. "No, I can't heal like you can" she begins to explain, "But...I've got powers too" her lips form into a soft smile, and for some reason, it makes his heart beat

wildly in his chest. Especially when two small dimples form at the corner of each cheek.

He's pretty sure his breath gets taken away. "What?" is all he's able to spit out, his eyes widening to the girl before him.

She let's go of his arm, sitting back on the couch once again, sighing heavily as Mike still sits on his knees, quite baffled.

He's not sure *what* to think, he's never met anyone who shares this peculiarity that he does. Granted, he did have this weird feeling that he couldn't be the *only* one out there. But, because he had never known what to think, he tended to keep his powers to himself. Although, his family and close friends knew, but they had always kept a tight lip.

His eyes flick to El, who seems to be contemplating what to say, and he can't blame her. He can't think of anything to say either.

That's when El's Anima springs lightly from the couch she was laying on over to where El sat.

He watches as El's amber eyes light up the moment her Anima is within reach of her. It's almost as if being apart is something that is a struggle for them.

Granted, no one liked to be separated from their Anima, and in reality, humans and Anima's can't get *too* far away due to the pain of the separation. Mike had heard once that they use that as a means of torture. Separate a human and Anima too much not only causes pain, but enough distance can kill them both.

Mike shudders at this aimless thought and instead brings his attention back to El, who strokes her Anima lovingly.

A calm silence falls on them. And Mike allows it to sit there, afraid of what might happen if it's broken.

After awhile, El finally speaks, "I can move things with my mind," she states, and Mike raises his head to look at her. She doesn't look at him, she only continues to stroke her marvelous fox.

Mike thinks before he speaks, "So...like the Dark Phoenix?" he cringes slightly, he was *really* trying to not sound like a nerd, but of course that's where his mind went. He found it incredibly difficult to talk to a very pretty stranger who shared something incredibly rare with him.

His cringe must show on his face because El lifts her head and her eyes land on his, a teasing smile dances on her lips as she shyly eyes him.

"I don't know who that is" her voice sounds guilty.

Mike shakes his head, "No, sorry, that was nerdy me speaking, uhm-" he stops as he rubs the back of his head mindlessly.

"She's this superhuman, and she can move stuff with her mind, like a telekinesis" he shrugs his shoulders as he tries to explain who Dark Phoenix all while watching El as she nods at his words.

"Yes, I guess she does sound like me", El says with a huff of breath.

Mike's not sure where the awkwardness in the air entered the room, but it was stifling. One moment El's a girl that practically broke her knee cap open, now, here they sat, pretty much still strangers, yet somewhat similar in retrospect. Mike thinks he should be reacting more than he was, but there's something that holds him back.

She must feel it too, because she gives him a quizzical look, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to just...make this all weird for you" her voice is heavy with sadness.

This makes Mike draw in his eyebrows, "What do you mean?" he asks.

El shrugs her shoulders and then looks him squarely in the eyes, "Well, it seems like you never knew that there were others like you".

Mike nods at this, "No...I didn't. I mean...I figured I couldn't be the *only* one but-"

And El cuts him off, "You never expected some stranger that you just saved would be that person?" she asks him.

Mike looks into her face and sees that it has softened, like she's trying to connect with him, but she isn't sure how.

So, Mike just lets out a long, slow breath, "Yeah, I guess so" he states.

El nods, "My sister has powers too" she says effortlessly and Mike whips his head back to her.

"Really?" he squeaks out.

"Yes, she can have people see things that aren't really there, it's a pretty cool power" she says nonchalantly.

Mike shudders a breath, "Yeah, that is interesting," he's not sure where to really go with all of this, he feels completely stunned.

But then, something El said earlier reminds him of a question that he definitely needs to ask, "What were you running from?" his eyes move to her face, and she barely meets them.

A gentle tear streams down her face, he moves on his own accord, moving to sit on her side that is not accompanied by her Anima. She startles slightly, but when he reaches out a tentative hand to touch her shoulder, she immediately seems to relax.

"I..I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry" he croaks out, his heart breaking for the girl beside him.

She moves her head slowly, and Mike waits as she finally connects her gaze with his. And he can see the hurt, the pain, that glistens behind her amber eyes, he's pretty sure his heart breaks in two.

El snuffles shaking her head, "No" she chokes out. "It's...it's just hard" her voice catches in her throat.

Mike sighs, understanding how she feels.

"It's okay, you don't have to-" he starts, but then El raises her hand and places it on top of his that sits on her shoulder. He wonders if she feels it too, the tingling sensation that spreads through him at her bare touch, it's amazing.

But, he can't tell because he tries to pull his attention to her as she speaks, "There's...bad men...after my sister and I" her voice strains.

Mike quirks his eyebrow, *'Did he just rescue a felon?'*, his brain starts, but he immediately scratches it off to the side, *'No, not El, there's something else'*, his mind settles with this thought, because he can see it in the way she looks, the connection they made. Fear stirs within her, and he knows she's scared.

So, he squeezes her hand in his, and she looks at him. "You don't have to tell me right now, I...I trust you" is what he says and the girls mouth widens in shock.

He's taken aback for a second, but he continues, "Look, it's late, we just learned some interesting things about one another and-" he stops, their eyes each searching the others, El's waiting for him to continue. But, he's so mesmerized by her warm brown eyes that it stops him in his tracks.

Mike watches as El lifts an eyebrow up at him, and he shakes his head, "Uhm...sorry, and, why don't we both get some sleep, maybe we can talk in the morning?" he suggests.

El's eyes widen once again, and now it's Mike's turn to be confused.

"What?" he can't help but ask and El shakes her head, she doesn't meet his gaze, "You...you make it sound like...like we can stay" is what she states.

Mike sits a bit straighter, "Yeah, of course. It's late, and-" he stops and points at her leg, "I know I healed it, but...you'll still be in a bit of pain", he then laughs nervously. "My powers have quite a bit of story to them too".

El finally moves her head to look at him, and he's happy to see a small smile on her face. But, then she tilts her head, "Why...why do you want to help me?" she asks.

Mike startles a bit, he's surprised by how quickly El seems to disregard any bit of help, and a million questions swirl through his brain. However, for now though, he needs her to trust him, questions

can be asked later, he reminds himself.

"Look...I don't entirely know what's going on here, with us-" he gestures between the two of them, "But, trust me when I say you're still going to be in pain and...I have a lot of questions" he shrugs.

It takes her a minute as the words settle between them, but she then slowly nods, "Okay" she finally whispers and a thankful breath escapes Mike's lip.

"Okay" he whispers happily, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He then moves to stand and he can feel El's eyes on him. He turns towards her, "Hold on, I'll be right back" he says and he moves back towards his bedroom.

Mike then takes a couple moments to flunder through his beauro as he paws through some of his more relaxed clothing. He finally pulls out an old pair of way too small sweatpants that probably needed to be donated *years* ago along with a navy blue sweatshirt.

Feeling satisfied, Mike moves back towards the living room with them.

El eyes him warily as he holds out the clothes to her, she quips an eyebrow at him.

"Here, these are old, but still comfortable", he begins to explain nervously as El takes them slowly from his grasp. He then points behind her, she casually follows his finger. "I've got a spare room and bathroom, you're free to take a shower if you want" he tries to sound as least creepy as possible considering he's pretty sure he just told a very pretty girl that she looks like she needs a shower.

She looks up at him, she moves to stand, "I-" she starts, but the second she puts weight on her knee, she grimaces and stumbles forward. Mike moves faster than he probably has in his entire life.

He bends down and catches El just before she crashes to the floor. His long arms snake under her armpits, as she raises her hands and places them against his chest. He steadies them so not to fall, but in doing

so he holds El tightly to his chest.

"You okay?" he asks with concern as El settles into his embrace, her head resting against his chest, and he hopes she can't hear the ferocious beating of his heart.

She slowly moves her head up, and he flushes at their closeness, *'I'd just have to bend down and then-'* but he stops his thoughts as the girl softens in his embrace. She looks tired. But, then she smiles, "Guess you were right about my knee" she states.

And Mike laughs awkwardly at her statement. "Yeah, sorry about that, I can usually do a pretty good job with healing the worst of the wound, but..." he trailed off not really sure what to say to the girl who is still in his embrace.

She continues to smile softly at him as she nods her head, "It's alright, I get it," she says, and he watches as her eyes dance across his face. He's pretty sure he's flushing even more so.

El shifts slightly as she pushes back from his chest slightly, wincing once again as she tries to steady herself on her feet.

"El, are you okay?" her Anima asks her, Mike sees the concern across the small foxes face.

El turns in Mike's arms, still holding onto him slightly, "Yes, I'm okay" she reassures the fox who relaxes.

Mike holds her arm steady, "Here, let me help you get to the room" he offers and El simply nods as he shifts and moves so that his left arm was wrapped around El's small frame.

"Alright, it shouldn't be as bad as trying to get to the apartment" he states as he begins to lead them towards the guest room. He's found to be proven right as El doesn't lean so heavily onto him like she had before, but she still limps on her bad leg as she holds onto Mike and the clothes in her free hand.

It takes only a minute for Mike to lead El to the small bedroom. He flicks on the lights and the small guest room that is only usually occupied by one of his sisters illuminates in a soft white glow.

Mike settles El onto the bed.

"There" he says as he moves slowly away from her. Her Anima jumping up onto the bed beside her.

El gives him a tired, yet grateful look, "Are you sure...that this is okay?" her voice sounds fragile.

Mike gives her an endearing gaze as he moves to bend down where her feet dangle from the bed.

He's not sure *why* he decides to, but he takes one of El's legs and begins to untie her very dirty, once white chucks. He does it delicately, slowly.

Once he has both removed he sets them off to the side. He looks up at the girl before him, and he can see the tears starting to form in her eyes, like she can't believe what he just did. It was as if she had never seen an act of kindness.

A tear drips down her cheek as he studies her face. He gives her a gentle look, "Your shoes are off, so that means you stay".

She tucks her lips into her mouth, her eyes glistening even more so, as if she's trying to hold back her tears.

He tilts his head to the right and just as he does so, he's very unexpectedly tackled as El wraps her arms tightly around his neck as she buries her face into his neck.

Since he's sitting on his knees, he throws one hand out behind him to steady himself from the force El hugs him, as he throws his other around her waist.

She begins to sob into neck, and Mike can feel the wetness beginning to form on his shirt, but he doesn't care, because even though he barely knows El, he knows enough.

She's broken, and has been for a long time, if not forever.

So, he readjusts them, kicking his feet out, and El allowing him to shift her so that she's practically sitting in his lap, just so that he can

give her a tight hug.

He allows her to cry as he rocks them gently. He honestly has no idea why he's doing this with a complete stranger, but there's something about El that's different than any other girl he's encountered. It's almost as if he's known her, his whole life, and that for some reason, he needs to protect her.

But, he allows these ideas and thoughts to dwindle into the back of his mind for later. Instead trying to focus on making sure El feels safe and comfortable.

It's like they sit there for hours. Mike trying to soothe the poor girl as both of their Anima's sit quietly, waiting for El to calm. However, it's only about ten minutes and Mike can feel El's breath even as her cries soften.

She finally pulled away from him, both of their hair mingled together, wet from sweat and tears, but Mike *really* doesn't care.

He puts all of his attention onto the girl as he reaches between them and tries to remove the hair from her face. He hears her giggle and Mike looks at her.

She shakes her head, "I'm so sorry" she laughs again as she pulls away from his embrace and he immediately misses their connection.

El moves so that she sits with her back to the bed, her legs sprawled out between his.

Mike softens, "Why are you apologizing?"

El pushes another stray hair behind her head, sniffing, she shakes her head, laughing in disbelief as she does so.

"You're...just so kind" her voice is watery, her red rimmed eyes meet his.

"I've...never had that before".

Mike's breath catches in his throat as her words settle into his mind.

"El" he says gently, willing the girl to look at him. It takes her a moment as she wipes away some stray tears, but she finally does, and he continues, "I don't care that we just met, there's something about you that-" he falters slightly, not really sure *how* he should explain the connection he feels between them.

But then El nods her head, "Just clicks" her smile is soft.

"Exactly" Mike breathes, truly not understanding what cruel trick fate was throwing them into, but his gut just told him to roll with it, so that's what he's doing.

So, with one last final exhale, Mike stands to his feet, and looks down at El, holding out his hand.

She quickly reaches out as he pulls her to her feet. She teeters lightly as she balances herself.

Their close once again, and Mike's heart hums happily. He nods his head towards the bathroom.

"Take a nice hot shower, then get some rest, we can talk more in the morning, okay?" his voice is gentle.

El nods, "Okay" is all she says, but he knows there is *much* more behind it.

So, reluctantly, he finally moves and heads towards the door, grabbing the handle as he begins to shut it.

"Thank you!" he hears El's voice heighten just as there is only about three inches of a gap for him to look through. He sees the hopeful look on her face, and it makes him grin widely.

"Don't thank me," he says, still smiling, "Goodnight El" he says.

"Night Mike" is what she says with one last look at one another as he shuts the door behind him.

He hovers slightly by the door, not really sure how to process what in the world just happened to him today.

But, he feels Pitch eyeing him.

"What?" he asks his Anima a bit more tersely than need be.

However, the wolf only grins, shaking his large head at his companion, "Oh, nothing" is all he says, teasingly, as he turns towards Mike's bedroom.

Mike only watches him go with a curious look on his face.

Alright, so what did you think? I thought it would be fun to give Mike some of his own powers in this story, which I will explore more in the next chapter. I know it seems like I'm moving them kind of quickly, but I just feel like with this being a soulmate AU, their going to feel a deeper connection no matter what.

I also know that I didn't go much into the Anima's with this chapter, but again that's going to be more prevalent in the next chapter as well.

I love hearing your reviews, and I can't thank you enough for the last one's it really makes writing these stories so much easier.

So, as always, PLEASE REVIEW!

3. Breakfast

Alright, I hope everyone enjoyed the last chapter. Thank you to those who gave a review I always appreciate them and they make writing any story easier! I'm really enjoying this story and I hope you are all as well! And once I get this story out of my head I will hopefully have more drive to continue with WHFIL.

Anyways, on with the story...

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or His Dark Materials.

June 14th, 1993

She feels like she's in a daze, unsure as to how her night even got to this point.

She wishes she was tucked back in the warehouse, safe and sound, surrounded by her comforting blankets, allowing sleep to take over. But, that's *not* where she was right now.

Instead, her whole life got thrown upside down and now she found herself standing in a complete strangers house, contemplating what her next move would be.

Okay, she shouldn't be calling the guy who saved and healed her a *complete* stranger because there was something about him that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"El, you okay?" a small voice pulls El from her reverie, she shakes her head and looked down at her small Anima, who's giving her a peculiar look.

El sighs heavily, as she twists the clothes that Mike had given her in her hands.

"I guess" is all she's able to say, not really sure *how* she should be feeling.

Her whole life just got ripped away from her. And now...now she was sitting in some guys house who apparently shared a gift just like her.

She can't shake the word: coincidence, from her mind because, was it?

And that's the question that continued to weave in and out of her mind as she sat there, staring off into space the moment Mike had shut the door.

Was it *truly* a coincidence that the same night she is trying to escape from the badmen that she so happens to run into Mike, who, like her, has extraordinary powers.

It's a lot for her to process, on top of the fear and worry that swirls about in her chest as her mind quickly shifts to Kali and the others.

Veda nuzzles her soft, orange-brown fur up against El's legs. El softens at the contact, the immediate connection with her own soul relieving some of the mounting fear.

"Hey, I know it's a lot to take in right now" Veda begins, looking up at El and then pouncing lightly up onto the bed to sit next to her. She rubs her head affectionately against El's arm, trying to soothe her, "But, we're safe, and that's what's important. It's what Kali would have wanted."

El nods slowly, but the stress of the day and the events that took place overwhelm her, and the warm tears begin to swell like an ocean wave in her eyes. Her vision goes blurry as El bends forward, bringing her hands to her face as she weeps quietly.

Veda continues to rub up against El in a way to calm her down. And El can feel the gentleness beginning to wash over her, but her pain still streams from her eyes, as she tries to keep her crying quiet, not wanting Mike to overhear her.

She feels like she's been crying for forever, but in reality it's only about ten minutes. When the fear and stress finally level back out, El pulls her head away from her hands, sniffing as she sits back up.

Her companion sits faithfully by her side, and El strokes her lovingly, she gives Veda a watery smile, "Thanks" she sniffs, and the fox gives her an endearing look.

"I'm always here for you...whether you like it or not" she laughs to herself and El laughs lightly in return.

The fox gives El's arm a slight head bump, "Why don't you do what Mike said? Take a nice hot shower and get ready for bed, it's late", and no sooner do the words come from Veda's mouth is she yawning, El copying in return.

"Okay", El says stifling another yawn as she carefully rises to her feet, putting light pressure onto her knee.

She winces slightly, but she can feel that the pain is starting to slowly dissipate.

El hobbles to the bathroom, flicking on the nearby light, she winces at the intensity.

Her eyes scanned the small bathroom. It's light blue walls brings an array of calmness, and it's lightly decorated with a couple of small pictures depicting the beach. El sets the clothes Mike had given her onto a nearby bench, and she finds a soft light blue towel hanging on the back of the door.

She has to laugh to herself as to how pristine the bathroom seems. She had never been in a bathroom like this in her life. It was either grungy gas station bathrooms, the small not very clean bathroom at the warehouse, or the small all white shower stall from the lab. An involuntary shudder runs up her spine as she thinks of the latter.

But, she pushes it from her mind as she smiles at the homeiness Mike's spare bathroom resonates.

El moves the matching powder blue curtain to the side and she can see an assortment of soaps and cleaning supplies lined in the tub.

She inches her hand forward and turns on the water which gushed into the tub, she then flicks on the showerhead.

Slowly and surely, El removes her heavy dark clothes from around her body. She sits gingerly on the toilet as she removes her pants, careful of her knee. She sighs inwardly seeing her once favorite pair of jeans are ruined due to the blood and Mike having to cut them

open, she tosses them to the side.

With her pants tossed to the side she takes a moment to look at her knee, and she still marvels at Mike's powers, she casually glances out of the bathroom and her eyes land on the comfy white bed.

Her mind flashes back to just a handful of minutes ago, where, Mike had daintily carried her into the room and gently laid her onto the bed.

His words were as smooth as honey, and his kindness just pulsed from his aura. She had all but lost it when he had removed her shoes, making it official that she *had* to stay.

When their eyes met, a connection formed between them. They had only known each other for an hour, but it had felt like a lifetime, like they were *always* meant to be together. Her heart had twitched at the thought.

And then, she launched herself into his arms, burying herself into his warmth, wishing she could feel that aura forever. She allowed herself a moment of weakness as she cried into his shoulder. She would never be able to thank him for everything he had done for her.

She had found herself slightly embarrassed when she finally pulled away, she hadn't even noticed that he had adjusted themselves so that she was practically sitting in his lap. El knows she was blushing furiously at the realization, but hoped that Mike saw her redface as a mere sign of her crying.

Then, his gentle touch. She wanted to swim in it for eternity. It was something she had *never* experienced in her life, for El never thought she actually would, but the way Mike looked at her, and treated her, it was as if she was made of glass.

And it made her heart beat even faster when he too had said he felt the undeniable connection between them.

Her mind begins to wander into the deeper parts of her mind as she thinks about soulmates.

'*Could he be yours?*' her heart whispers dangerously in her ear, but El

shakes herself out of her thoughts, "No" she whispered to herself, chastising her heart for even mentioning it to her.

She lets out a long breath as El moves her hand to the water that cascades down into the shower, and it's *very* warm, another thing she is not used to.

El moves into the shower gingerly and closes the curtain. She can't help but let out a hum of contentment as the warm water surrounds her. El's shoulders drop and the tension from the day melts away.

She allows herself time to just allow the spray to hit her. Finally, she finds shampoo and lathers the delicious scent of strawberries into her hair.

It's as if the grime of her life is being washed away. The thick hair gel that usually coats her brown hair dissipates as the soap attacks it.

She can feel her soft curls coming through, something she doesn't notice very often. The cheap soap that she and the gang usually shares is barely surmountable to whatever she is using now.

El allows herself to spend time washing her body and marveling at how amazing a warm shower actually feels. The one in the warehouse barely getting above room temperature. This however, is heaven.

Once El finishes in the shower she grabs the nearby towel and marvels at its softness as she wraps it around her body. The steam from the shower dances slowly around her, coating the mirror in a filmy haze.

El raises her hand and wipes away at the steam, revealing herself in the mirror.

She can't help but stare at her reflection, rich amber eyes stare back at her, her hair no longer held straight by the gel, but it now cascades gently just past her shoulders.

For some reason, it makes her smile, there's something about the way she looks that makes her feel different. She lets out a long breath, and moves back into the room.

Slowly, she pulls on Mike's clothes. The sweatpants are baggy, and swim past her feet.

Even Veda lets out a laugh as El pulls the navy blue sweatshirt over her head, and it envelops her.

El tries to dry her hair as best as possible before she sets the towel to dry and lays down in the *extremely* comfortable bed that entices her to relax.

"Wow, this bed is *amazing!*" Veda coos as she moves to El's other side and makes a couple circles before lying down.

El hums in acknowledgement, as she lays in the comfortable bed and gazes towards the ceiling. She uses her powers to flick off the light, and darkness envelops her.

She doesn't hear much from the usual noisy city, but she can feel her eyes weigh with heaviness. With one last yawn she allows sleep to overtake her.

Holy shit. Is the first thing that goes through his mind the moment he goes into his bedroom and closes the door behind him, setting his back against the wooden object and sliding down it slowly.

Pitch gives him a look, "What are you worried about?" his companion voices Mike's concern.

Mike buries his face into his hands letting out a loud groan, not responding to Pitch's question.

What was he worried about?

Was it the fact he just met a complete stranger off the street, rescued her and healed her? Was it that they each had their own powers? Or, was it the way his heart beat rapidly against his chest each time their eyes met one another?

No matter *what* his worry was, Mike wasn't really sure as to how to deal with how his life had honestly just got flipped around.

He had a million questions to ask her, and he didn't even know where to start.

"You worry too much", Pitch says dryly as he moves to his small bed set beside Mike's. The Anima moves in three quick circles before he plops himself onto his bed.

Mike finally removes his hands from his face and glares at his Anima.

Sometimes Mike never understood why he and Pitch were so *different*.

For most people and their Anima, they responded in the same way, reacted to the same emotions, they meshed with one another. But for he and Pitch, it seemed almost like Pitch was Mike's consciousness in physical form, not his soul.

Mike found it frustrating sometimes as to how Pitch would voice, his own concerns swirling in his own head before he even knew what was bothering him. It was as if Pitch was one step ahead, and it annoyed Mike, but he never admitted it to his Anima.

So, instead Mike huffed and pulled himself to his feet.

"Take your own advice, take a shower or something, you reek", Pitch says nonchalantly, his eyes closed.

Mike rolls his eyes as he shuffles to his bathroom. "Already on it" he throws a hand in his Anima's direction.

Shutting the door, Mike quickly disrobes and tosses his now ruined suit off to the side. He's thankful he has many more to spare.

He turns on the water and waits for it to warm, and while he does, Mike leans into the sink, his hands holding himself steady. He slowly raises his head and looked into the mirror. He sighs when he sees the dark rims already beginning to form beneath his eyelids.

He can feel the exhaustion finally washing over him.

Steam starts to surround him and without a second thought Mike moves into the shower and stands beneath the stream of water.

He begins to think of the girl, El, who is only about twenty feet away from him.

Truthfully, he can't believe what he learned tonight and it's been difficult for him to process.

She's like me, echoes through his mind as the water trickles down his face. He still can't believe it.

He closes his eyes and El is the only thing he can see.

Her rich amber eyes, her soft but tender looks. His heart jumped in his chest and Mike has to place his hands out to the shower walls to steady himself.

He had *never* felt like this before with any girl that he met. Yes, there was an obvious attraction to some woman, but...there was something different about El.

Mike slowly opened his eyes, the water blurred his vision slightly as he did so. There was something about *her*, her whole being that pulled Mike to her like a magnet and he couldn't explain it, honestly, it scared him.

He allowed his mind to wander and play as he tried to come to terms with the night as he finished up his shower. Emerging from the cloud of steam of the bathroom as he headed to his drawers and dressed in his night clothes.

Settling into bed his brain only continued to hum with anticipation of morning. He shut his eyes and willed himself to calm down, sleep finally finding him.

The bright sun cascaded into his room, and fell directly into his eyes.

Mike grunted as he turned himself over mentally scolding himself for forgetting to shut his shades in the night.

Blearily, he lifted his head and looked over at his alarm clock.

8:36 flashed at him and he harrumphed into his pillow, closing his

eyes and willing himself to get more sleep.

But then, his mind was wide awake, reminding him of what had occurred the night before.

El, the name danced teasingly through his mind. There was currently a girl in his apartment, and it wasn't either of his sisters who were usually the occupants of his spare room.

Pulling himself up into a seated position Mike rubbed at his tired eyes. He looked over the side of his bed and saw that Pitch was still curled up and past out.

Mike sighed, this was another thing that was unusual. Most humans and their Anima's slept and woke at fairly similar times. Not he and Pitch. Once Mike was up, he was up. But Pitch, he could continue to sleep for quite awhile, sometimes Mike would have to shake the wolf awake so that they could get going for the day.

But, Mike put this aside as he cast his legs out and stood from his bed, stretching out his sore shoulders.

He quietly made his way to his door and pried it open slowly, unsure if *El* had awoken yet.

His eyes did a quick survey of his apartment and with a sigh of relief, Mike finished opening his door and padded out into his living room.

He glanced over to his spare bedroom and found that the door was still closed, and he couldn't help the smile that pulled at his face.

"Good" he whispered aloud to himself. He wasn't sure *why* he was happy to see that the girl was still behind closed doors, but a part of himself realized he was relieved to see that she had stayed.

Apart of his worry throughout the night would be that once night had settled she would slip out into the night.

Mike made his way to his well stocked kitchen. He began to fiddle with his coffee maker. A thought popped into his head, '*Did El like coffee?*'.

He took another quick look at the door and huffed. He knew absolutely *nothing* about this girl, other than she had powers and was in danger.

So, as he silently debated with his own self, he finally decided to add a bit more coffee grounds and water to his coffee maker. *I can always warm it up again later*, he reminded himself.

Once the coffee maker began to come alive Mike turned his back to the counter and leaned against it.

With his arms folded over his chest he continued to glance anxiously towards El's door, wondering, worrying if his original thoughts had been true.

Maybe she just shut the door when she left, his brain alarmed him.

"Again, you worry too much"

Mike whipped his head over to the voice of Pitch who was giving him another teasing look.

He tried to act as nonchalantly as possible, "I don't know what you mean," Mike shook his head at the wolf.

Pitch chuckled, "Hmmm, seems that you're worried about the fact that the girl might have left in the middle of the night".

"El", her name is out of his mouth before he can even register it, Mike casts a cautious look over to the wolf.

Pitch quirks an eyebrow up at him, a teasing smile dancing on his lips.

"If you want her out here, whip up some breakfast. Maybe some bacon, that *always* gets me up" Pitch teases as he comes to sit by Mike, looking up at him expectantly.

Mike rolls his eyes, and he can't help but pat the head of his companion.

"Alright" he sighs as he moves towards his refrigerator, searching

through the contents before he stumbles upon the pack of thick cut bacon. He removes it along with the carton of eggs that sits beside the package.

He tries to move quietly around the kitchen trying to not make too much noise, hoping the smell of cooked bacon awakens the girl and not his noisy habits.

Mike sets to cooking the bacon, and within minutes his apartment begins to fill with the all too familiar aroma.

He cracks open a couple of eggs and gets them ready as well. Mike can't help but cast hopeful looks over his shoulder as he keeps waiting for his guest door open.

His heart sinks each time it doesn't open.

He busies himself with sipping at his coffee and paying attention to the meal in front of him. Half way through he decides to put a couple pieces of toast into the toaster.

Sighing heavily, Mike shakes his head, "What am I doing?" he half whispers to himself through clenched teeth as he takes a look at the smorgasboard of food that he has finally finished.

Just as he cascades a worried hand through his thick hair, thinking about how much of a loser he is, he's startled by a small voice.

"Wow, that smells really good".

Mike whips his head around almost giving himself whiplash as he gives a surprised looked to the girl who has finally vacated her room.

He's pretty sure his heart stops when he sees her.

She's actually surprised by how well she slept, and for once, no dreams haunted her mind throughout the night.

The light from the three windows overlooking the city streams in through the blinds, but it's not the sun that awakens her, it's the growl of her stomach.

She sniffs the air and a pleasant aroma attacks her nostrils. It pulls her from her slumber.

"Mmm", she sighs heavenly as the salty smell enters her room.

"Wow", El turns to see Veda standing on her tiptoes beside her as she casts her head upwards sniffing the air.

Veda looks to El, "What is that?" she asks quietly.

El shrugs her shoulder as she slowly pulls the soft sheets away from her body as she tiptoes across the fluffy white carpet to place her ear gently onto the wooden doors surface.

She closes her eyes and listens intently. Then, she can hear the sizzling, and clanking.

El can't help but smile she turns to Veda, "He must be making breakfast" she shrugs as she moves towards the bathroom.

"Hmm, wonder if it's for us?" Veda teases from the bed as El examines herself in the mirror.

El rolls her eyes as she runs a hand through her matted hair. She huffs, as she looks at her reflection.

El then begins to examine the drawers in the bathroom and silent cheers when she finds a brush. She can't help but begin to stroke the wooden tool through her hair as she watches her brown locks bounce to a more natural appeal.

Once she's done she takes a nearby wash cloth and wipes at her face. Satisfied, El exits the bathroom and sits herself on the edge of the bed.

She catches another wiff of the food, and her stomach growls loudly.

Veda laughs, "Why don't we see what he's cooking up?" she suggests with a gleam in her eye.

El looks down at her lap and shakes her head, "I...I don't know, I mean..." she stops short, not really sure what to say.

Veda huffs, "Well, we can't stay here forever, besides, I'm hungry too".

El looks into her companions face, and then her deep brown eyes. With a small laugh El nods, "Okay" she sighs as she slowly gets to her feet and makes her way towards the door.

Her hand hovers over the door handle, contemplating.

Will he be okay with us coming out? Her worried mind asks her.

"El, come on, it'll be fine", Veda encourages her.

And, as if her stomach agreed with her companion, it gives another low growl.

So, with a deep breath El places her hand on the cool doorknob and slowly opens the door.

It doesn't take her long to get to the kitchen, and then, she sees him.

She's pretty sure her eyes widen when she sees Mike turned away from her. His hair is a wild mess, and he's still dressed in his pajama pants. El flushes at the sight.

She can see that he seems worried, as he runs a slow hand through his hair, he's muttering to himself.

El decides to break the silence, "Wow, that smells really good".

And no sooner does she speak does Mike whip around to stare at her. She's taken aback slightly when she watches him give her a once over, his mouth dropping open slightly.

She knows she is flushing madly at the way he's looking at her. And she's not really sure if it's in awe, or disgust.

But then, he smiles. A really dorky, lopsided grin, and El's pretty sure she melts right there on the spot. *Cute*, echoes through her brain.

"Uh, hi...uhm, good morning!" he all but shouts at her as El stays rooted in her spot as Mike slowly approaches her.

He winces slightly at what he must realize was a bit of a loud greeting. But El can't help but grin at his cuteness.

"Good morning" she whispers back. She holds one of her sleeved hand up to her mouth, a shy tendency of hers.

"Did..did you sleep okay?" he gestures to her, and El nods.

"Yes, your bed is really comfy" she smiles at him.

Mike nods eagerly at this, "Yeah, I've got two sisters who come and stay sometimes, so the bedroom tends to stay up to their needs, and the bathroom too".

"I noticed there was a lot of floral scents in there" El tries to add to the conversation, but she flinches slightly at her awkwardness. She was also slightly relieved to discover that it didn't seem like Mike had many female visitors.

Mike seems to notice this because he laughs lightly.

"I'm sorry, this is just kind of-" he moves his hands slightly and El answers, "Weird" she scrunches her face, giggling.

Mike laughs, "Yeah, exactly" he sighs.

El only nods as they both stood there in silence, shifting on their feet uncomfortably.

Mike then straightens, "Oh, uh, I made breakfast, want to eat?" he gestures towards the mound of food that is placed out on his island.

El's eyes widen at the assortment of food. Bacon, eggs and toast are all piled high on individual plates and her mouth waters.

"Uh-" she starts, feeling as if she is imposing, but Mike just about reads her mind.

"Don't feel like you're imposing, I mean, we said we'd sit down and talk today and, well, you can't do that on an empty stomach, can you?" he looks at her with his sweet brown eyes and El softens immediately.

She looks down at Veda who is nodding vigorously her bushy tail wagging eagerly.

El looks back up at Mike who's giving her a look and El flushes again, "Okay" she says gently and Mike's body seems to sag in relief.

"Alright, cool" he announces nodding his head eagerly as El approaches him.

"Cool" she returns with a smile as Mike hands her a plate.

Their fingers brush slightly and there's an intensity there that surges through El like never before. She almost drops the plate at the sensation. And Mike has to re-grip the plate to stop it from falling to the floor.

"Sorry!" El stammers quickly as she now locks both of her hands firmly onto the glassware.

Her eyes peered upwards to see if Mike is mad at her, but instead, she sees his soft eyes and slight smile as he shakes his head.

"It's okay" he stammers out, letting go of the plate, and El ponders as she sees his face begin to redden, as he turns away from her, reaching into his cabinet and grabbing another plate.

El is silent as she grabs a couple pieces of bacon, an egg and a piece of toast, she goes to move when Mike stops her with a laugh.

"Is that it? Please, help yourself, and Veda too" he nods to her companion.

El flushes, "I uh-" she starts, but feels very embarrassed, not sure what to say.

Mike shakes his head, his wild black hair going every which way. "Don't worry, I made way too much food so please help yourself".

And at this El's stomach gives a betraying growl, causing her to flush even more red as she sighs and piles even more food onto her plate.

Mike gently handed her another as she fills it for Veda.

They move in silence as Mike gets a plate ready for Pitch, both she and Mike nearly bump into each other as they both turn to give their Anima's their own breakfast.

Small laughs escape their mouths as Mike gestures for her to move first, and he follows. They place the plates in front of their Anima's who begin to eat ravenously.

Mike chuckles again as he moves to grab his own plate, El following in turn.

He leads them to his small nook that consists of a small round table, four wooden chairs sit around it.

Mike sets his plate down and scoots himself in.

El hesitates slightly, and Mike looks up at her.

"You going to eat standing up?" he flashes her a teasing grin.

El shakes her head as she moves slowly towards the seat next to him. Gingerly, she sets down her plate and looks at her food.

"Oh!" Mike's voice startles El as she whipped her head to him, her eyes widening at his sudden outburst as he begins to stand, "Forgot the forks, and syrup" he says as he hustles back towards the kitchen.

As Mike moves away, El looks out the large window before her. The sun has already risen and the buildings flash the sunlight this way and that. There's something serene about the whole thing, and El feels her mind begin to go blank.

She's only pulled out of her daze when Mike puts a fork in front of her eyes.

"Here" he says, and El takes the tool from him gently. He then places a bottle of maple syrup in front of them.

She eyes it curiously.

Mike must see her skeptical look because he reaches forward and chuckles lightly, "I didn't know if you liked syrup with your

breakfast" he shrugs as he opens the bottle and begins to shower his eggs and bacon in the golden liquid.

El of course loved maple syrup, it was one of the few luxuries, along with a box of eggo's that Kali allowed her to splurge on every once in awhile. However, lacking in eggos and any other breakfast foods that were usually accompanied by syrup, El's eyes widened as she watched the man before her add it to his eggs and bacon.

She must have been staring because once Mike finishes with the bottle their eyes meet and he gives her a shy look. "Sorry, I know it's a little weird, but I've done it since I was a kid. My friends and sisters always pick on me because of it".

He almost sounds ashamed for his habit, because he almost cocoons himself as he raises his shoulders and tries to hide his face from her as he slowly picks up his fork and pushes around his food.

El doesn't know why, but his action makes her sad. It makes her begin to think of just how many other times in Mike's life had he been ridiculed for small things. It was almost as if he spent his life trying to hide his quirkiness.

But, there was something about his awkwardness that El couldn't help but find endearing, and if she wasn't lying, attractive.

So, with a bold move El reached her hand forward and grabbed the sticky bottle of syrup. Popping open the top she began to swirl the liquid from it's bottle as it cascaded down onto her eggs and bacon.

When she's done she places it before her, and turns to look at Mike, who's looking at her gobsmacked.

She gives him a smirk as she picks up her fork and cuts into her eggs, now drenched in the sweet syrup, she brings it to her mouth.

"No, you don't have-" Mike starts, but El has already shoved the eggs into her mouth and she chews thoroughly.

The sweet, saltiness awakens something she's never experienced before and she finds that it's delicious.

She swallows and looks at Mike, smiling. "That's so good!" she hums as she moves to the bacon and almost moans at the same, but almost better taste that surrounds her taste buds.

She hesitantly peeked over to Mike, who has a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"You...you really like it?" he asks.

El nods appreciatively, "It's *really* good, you're a really good cook" she comments stuffing her face with another spoonful of eggs and bacon, and as she says the words Mike flushes, and El finds that she really enjoys it when he gets all flustered.

They continue to eat their breakfast in a quiet state, and El finds herself comfortable with the whole situation. Which she finds incredibly weird, because not even ten hours ago she didn't even know Mike existed, now, here she was, eating breakfast in his apartment.

"Mike, that was very good" Veda approaches them at the table, sitting herself beside El.

Mike looks down at Veda and gives her a smile, "Thank you" he nods in appreciation.

Just then Pitch moves to sit beside Mike, "Eh, could have gone a little lighter on the bacon" the wolf teases and Mike throws the wolf a look.

"Shut it, Pitch Black" Mike grumbles and the wolf rolls his eyes.

"Pitch Black?" El asks the question stumbling out of her mouth before she can catch herself.

She holds her hands up over her mouth and Mike only laughs.

"It's fine, you can ask about his name" he then teasingly ruffles the wolf's black hair.

Pitch snaps at him playfully. And it's then El can see on Pitch's muzzle, he has a smattering of white spots, almost impossible to see,

and El smiles realizing that they are a reflection of Mike's adorable freckles.

Wait, adorable?, her mind questions and El inwardly cringes, she immediately tries to shake her thoughts away and she's thankful when Mike speaks again.

"Yeah, my sister named him actually?" Mike says rolling his eyes, them falling onto El as he reclines in his chair.

"Your sister?" she repeats and Mike nods.

"Mhm, you see, Pitch has *always* manifested himself as a dark black animal, even when I was born," he explains.

El nods, showing that she is listening intently.

He smiles to himself, "First a vole, then a rabbit, a frog-" El watched Mike cringe at the mention of Pitch being a frog, "Then a black cat for most of my teenage years, and now-" he gestures to Pitch, "A wolf" he shrugs.

"My sister Nancy thought it was funny that Pitch was also so black, like my hair, so she called him Pitch Black, and it just stuck".

El nods, smiling genuinely at Mike's story, she always found it fascinating what other creatures people's Anima's appeared as over their lives.

She knew that Anima's reflected where a person was in their lives. And sometimes it had to do with the environment a person was raised in as well.

"What about you?" Mike's voice brings El's attention back to him.

She quirks an eyebrow at him.

He gives her a shy look, "How did you get the name Veda, it's unique".

El sighs, she *knows* that the whole point of her staying there last night was for her to explain what had happened to her and why she had

been running away. Not just that, but she was sure that Mike had a million questions about her own powers, which she had yet to show him.

Mike waits patiently fiddling with his hands in his seat, allowing El to take her time.

Letting out a huff of air, El slowly raises her head and Mike's dark eyes are already awaiting her.

El swallows before she speaks, "Veda" she starts, "Was the first name I was able to read off of one of the lab workers name tags".

She watches as Mike furrows his eyebrows.

El pulls her lips in tight before she continues, "Veda was one of the few female lab workers and I liked it. My Anima had gone so long without a name, and it just seemed to fit" she shrugged her shoulders looking down at the being she spoke of.

"Lab, what lab?" Mike gives her a look, and El gives a tight smile.

"The lab...where I was born, raised and...tortured" she feels her voice warbling slightly as Mike's mouth drops open in shock at her words.

Alrighty, I'm going to leave it there because I know this will go well into the next chapter and I needed to get a new one out sooner rather than later.

What do you guys think? I know this chapter was a bit wordy and I needed to get it leading up to this discussion, but I hope you all enjoyed it.

I really do appreciate and read EVERY review I get on my stories and I REALLY love them and they fuel my writing.

So, as always PLEASE REVIEW! Stories thrive on them! Thank you!

4. Finding Comfort In Each Other

Thank you, thank you, thank you, to those who gave such wonderful reviews, I loved reading each and every one! They truly make writing these stories so meaningful! I know I left you on a cliffhanger from the last chapter, so I hope this one makes up for it! Thank you again!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or His Dark Materials

June 15th 1993

She's not surprised when she watches Mike's mouth drop open in shock at the declaration of her words. She lowers her head slightly as she evaluates him, because he's opening and closing his mouth like he wants to say something, but isn't quite sure with what he actually wants to say

Finally, he chokes out, "Tortured?" his dark eyes wide.

El nods sadly, "Yes" is all that she says.

Mike lets out a long breath of air as he brushes back his wild mess of curls. El silently enjoys watching his hair go right back to its original state after he removes his hand.

His eyes catch hers, and she can see the worry glistening behind his dark orbs.

She's *never* shared her story with anyone. Kali was the one who told their story to the gang when they first moved to New York. And El had never had any friends outside of the gang, so who would she ever tell it to?

But, then there's this man who sits before her. He's wildly searching her face, uncertain of just the little information she has just shared with him.

She's afraid that she will see pity in his eyes, but she's actually surprised when she doesn't, but instead sees a flash of fear, worry and interest instead.

His next words break the silence, "A lab...you were born there?" is his first question.

El nods slowly, "Yes, it's actually a good place to start," she sighs.

She turns and looks out the window before her, the sun now harshly glinting off the reflective windows of the buildings, her eyes squint at the brightness.

"My mom..." a small smile ghosts at the corner of El's mouth before she shakes her head and turns to look at Mike whose attention is rapt on her, "My mom, got involved in some experiments back in the early seventies. Back when psychedelic drugs were being used to push the boundaries of the mind".

Mike nodded awaiting for El to continue. "However" El breathed, fiddling with her hands in her lap, "My mom got a little too involved with the experiments. She didn't live at the lab, and had a separate life from it, but the head doctor there took a liking to her and what she was able to do".

"But, it wasn't *her* that he was interested in, but...me" she says quietly and she watches as Mike shifts in his seat leaning closer to her.

"What did you have to do with anything?" Mike asks, his brows furrowed.

"My mom didn't realize she was pregnant with me till she was almost in her third trimester, but I think the doctor did. And I was exposed to a lot of different things, I think he knew that when I was born that I'd be special" she shrugs her shoulders.

El pauses for a second before she continues. "So, when my mom went into labor with me, the doctor was there, and my mom was delirious, so she had no idea what was going on".

El tucks in her lips, "The doctor took me from her the moment I was born".

"What!?" Mike cried out shoving his kitchen chair back suddenly, causing El to flinch at the screeching noise.

"He just took you!?" he casts his arm out in frustration and El merely nods.

"Yes, he was famous for kidnapping children with unique abilities, however, I was different, he got me from birth, something he was unable to do with any of the others".

"Others?" Mike raises his eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm number Eleven" she says and at that moment El silently moves her right hand towards her left wrist, she *always* keeps it covered whether it be with an old bandana or some kind of bracelet, but now it is covered in the Mike's sweatshirts long arm. She hates seeing the permanent mark but she knows she needs to show Mike. So, she pushes up her sleeve and moves her arm towards him, and his eyes widened even more when the numbers 011 are seen.

He studies the tattoo and before she can react, he reaches forward and gently takes her wrist in his large hand.

She shivers at the contact, his hands cool to the touch, but also that same spark is there yet again.

El gazes at him as he almost caresses the faded mark with a single fingertip.

"He did this to you" his voice cool, as he lifts his eyes to meet hers. She can see within the depths that there's pure hatred.

El didn't answer, but instead slid her hand through Mike's grasp and took ahold of his fingers, squeezing them gently.

Mike's eyes immediately flashed to hers. She tried to give him a soft smile, but she knew he could see through it.

"I can't remember when, but yes, I've had it for as long as I can remember."

Mike scoffs, looking away from her, but he squeezes her hand tightly, and she feels the tingly sensation return.

"Wait" he says turning back towards her. "El, Eleven, that's your

name?"

El nods once again, humming to his answer.

"You...you don't even have like... a *real* name?!" his grip becomes tighter, and at this El giggles.

"No, I do, I just don't like it, I like El better" she shrugs.

"How did yo-" Mike begins to ask and El cuts him off, "Lots of research after we left the lab," she answers, and Mike nods slowly.

After a beat, she speaks, "Jane, my real name is Jane," she says. Mike gives her a once over and a shy smile plays on his lips.

"Yeah, you don't look like a Jane" he laughs lightly.

El grins at this, "My sister Kali used to call me Jane, but I don't like it. El was the name I gave myself after we left the lab, it's mine" she states firmly.

Mike makes a noise in agreeance. "So, what about your sister, was she there as a baby too?" he asks.

El shakes her hair, "No, the doctor found her when she was four or so, kidnapped her from her parents".

Mike lets out a long breath of air at this, "So, this is just some guy who kidnaps children for his own needs?" his voice drips with venom.

She can't help but shrug at this, "There were others there, but...none of them were like Kali and I, we were stronger, had more adept powers. Apparently the doctor wanted the strongest, he let others go", her voice is timid.

Mike shakes his head, "What did this 'doctor' even hope to accomplish?" he asks, searching El's face.

"Something to do with the Russians. He was always pushing Kali and I to our limits...even on each other" she whispers.

At this Mike pulls back again, "What do you mean?"

El sighs, "Well, obviously we didn't like everything he had us do. Whether it was torturing animals, or straining our powers so much that we would be drained for days. But, then he figured out that if he used our Anima's against us, then he could have whatever he wanted from us".

She's pretty sure Mike growls at this. "He tortured you, and Veda" his teeth are gritted together as he speaks.

El nods, "Yes, if he separated us from our Anima and tortured them, it was hard to not do what he said. It was even worse once he had us starting to use our powers against each other" her voice lowers an octave.

"Wait, each other?" Mike's eyes narrow.

She huffs, "That was the worst part. He thought if we used our powers against each other we would grow stronger. He also wanted to see if our own powers could affect the other...they did".

Mike shakes his head, "How could anyone do that to a child?" his voice strains.

El shrugs her shoulder, "This man wasn't like anybody else. All he cared about was pushing us to our limits, figuring out what our full potential was. We weren't his children, we were his weapons" she cautiously lifts her eyes and she can see Mike is shaking with fury.

"Children?" it's more of a question than anything.

"He made us call him papa, but he was *never* our father" El says coolly.

"Sick bastard" Mike says clenching his fists together.

He then looks at her quickly, "But wait, how did you-" he starts but El meets him halfway, "Escape?" she finishes, and Mike nods.

El looks upwards as she recalls the day where she and Kali finally got their freedom.

"We had been planning it for *months*, I was fifteen and Kali was seventeen at the time, everything had to go just right if we wanted it

to work and not get captured again, that would have been the worst possible outcome" El begins to explain.

"You see, Kali and I had only one day of rest within each week, and it was those days that there were less lab attendants than usual."

"So, when Kali and I got brought out of our rooms for lunch, it's when we struck", she looks at Mike who is hanging off of his seat listening to her story.

"Kali used her powers to have our guards believe that a fire had broken out in the lab, which of course sent them into a frenzy. Then Kali and I made our way to the nearest exit, of course we were met with a flurry of lab workers who tried to stop us, and...that's where I came in" her voice lowers somberly.

"I-" she starts but falls short. She takes in a shaky breath, "I...I killed them."

Mike doesn't make a noise, so El tentatively looks at him as he shakes his head, as his hand squeezes hers tighter, "They tortured you El, they deserved it" his voice is firm, and El softens as she tries to hold back her tears.

"I still hated doing it though, killing another human being...it still doesn't feel right," she explains.

Mike doesn't respond so El continues, "But, we made it out, nothing but the clothes on our backs, and we escaped into the woods".

"How did you get here though? Was the lab in New York?" he questions.

"No. When we escaped from the lab we just ran, we ran through the thick forest until we came across a restaurant and the first person who was kind to us" a sad smile dances across her face.

She takes a steadying breath, closing her eyes as she pictures the restaurant clear as day. It was small and old, but full of charm. El remembers the greasy and enticing scent that drifted from the building.

"It was something neither of us had seen before, and the smell..." El inhales deeply, as if she was once again standing in the midst of the messy kitchen.

She exhales, "Was just so appealing, and we were starving, so we went in" El smiles once again recalling the memory. "There was a basket of french fries just sitting there and Kali and I just helped ourselves. We were so enamored by the food we didn't even notice that there was other people there".

"We didn't know what to do when Benny came after us" El laughed.

"But, when he grabbed us and saw that we were dressed in hospital gowns, and my shaved head-" El continued but Mike cut her off with a puzzled look, "Shaved head?" he asks incredulously.

El froze slightly, it wasn't something she necessarily liked to talk about, but *she* was the one who brought it up. She swallows before she continues nodding her head, "Yeah. The doctor liked my head shaved, he used these-" and then she gestures to her head, "Electrode things used to monitor my brain waves or something, so he kept my head shaved" she finishes bitterly.

"That's why I like my hair long now" she smiles at Mike shyly tucking a stray lock behind her ear.

He finally breaks his blank look and a dopey smile crosses his face, he ducks away shyly, "It looks really pretty" he mumbled as he eyes her nervously and El's mouth drops open at his words, her face flushed furiously.

"Thanks" she whispers back, both of them with shy looks on their faces.

A silence falls over them for a minute as they allow their tender moment to pass. And then El picks up where she left off, "Anyways, Benny realized we weren't your 'normal' teenagers, so he fed us some real food and found some old clothes that were his daughters.

"It was a relief honestly, to actually feel safe" El breathes out slowly, "But, it didn't last long" her mouth falls.

"What do you mean?" Mike questions giving her a curious look as he leans forward, his chair creaked as he did so.

El sighs heavily, tears pricking at her eyes once again, really not liking recounting this part of the story, "Benny he...he called a child services number and, later on in the evening, a woman from the lab, who was close to the doctor came".

A stray tear escapes her eye, "Kali saw her and before she could warn Benny...she shot him" she sniffles trying to hold back her crying.

"Kali and I escaped again and...we just ran" she states, taking Mike's sweatshirt and rubbing her tear stained face.

Mike places a gentle hand on her arm, he looks at her, "That's awful El, I'm really sorry to hear that" he says softly.

She can see the empathy in his face and she knows he's being genuine.

He pulls back and glances away, El follows his gaze, "Wow, it's almost lunch time" he laughs as he nods towards their breakfast plates that have remained vacant for the time they've spent talking.

Mike gives her a look, "Hey, why don't we get changed, and regroup a bit, this must be really hard for you, so...let's take a break?" it's more of a question. He's allowing her to control this situation, and for some reason, it warms her to her core.

El sniffs again nodding, "Yeah, that sounds good" she flashes him a quick smile as she pushes out her chair, standing to her feet and bends to grab her plate, but Mike beats her to it with a quick laugh.

"Nope, you're my guest I got it" he chuckles.

El softens, "Thank you" she says gently looking at the man before her. He only nods, "Anytime" he states as he takes his plate as well and moves back towards the kitchen.

She begins to shuffle towards Mike's spare bedroom, but his voice stops her, "Hey!" he says and El pivots rapidly on her feet, her eyebrows raising to her hairline.

"Uh, my sister Nancy is about your size, she leaves clothes here all the time, you're welcome to wear them" he raises a hand towards the room and then drops it to his side. He shifts anxiously on his feet.

El gives him a warm smile, "I managed to grab some of my clothes, but thank you though" she tries to keep her voice gentle, hating to have to deny him of his offer.

But, her worry leaves her when Mike grins back, "Okay, just wanted you to know," he says. And with one last nod to Mike, El and Veda shuffle into the spare bedroom, El shutting the door for privacy behind her.

Behind the closed door, El lays her back against the white door and slides down slowly. She can feel her anxiety begin to bubble deep within her as she pulled her knees up to her chest and burrows her face into them.

Her body begins to shake, a common factor when she feels overwhelmed by emotions. Veda is immediately by her side as she tries to not cry out.

"El, you're okay, you're safe" her Anima tries to soothe her.

Fresh hot tears stream down her face as Veda attempts to calm her.

"I know...it's...it's just so hard" she cries quietly into Mike's sweatpants, her tears leaving marks.

"I know, it's not easy recounting everything you've been through after going through our ordeal yesterday" the fox nuzzles under El's chin, causing the girl to smile. Veda then moves swiftly into El's lap, curling up there, El stroking her affectionately.

"At least he's listening, and he seems to care" Veda states.

"He does care" the words come effortlessly from El's mouth, and it surprises herself.

Veda cranes her neck to El and gives her a pointed look, and El shakes her head. She knows her Anima is teasing her, but she chooses to ignore her.

After a handful of minutes El finally rises to her feet and moves to her bag. She retrieves her dark clothing and gets dressed slowly. Eventually moving back to the bathroom to freshen up a bit.

When she's done she looks at the clock beside her bed and the numbers flash 1:45 at her. El flopped back onto the bed and sighed heavily looking at the ceiling above her.

Her eyes grow heavy and she allows herself to drift off.

The moment El shuts the door to her room. The smile he had been giving her falls quickly to a frown. Not because of El, but because of everything he's learned so far about her childhood, her upbringing, and the man who called himself her father.

Mike turns towards his kitchen sink and places both of his hands against it. Closing his eyes tightly as his body shakes with anger. He tries to hold back the scream that pounds against his chest he so desperately wants to release.

"Mike, you've got to calm down a bit" Pitch says slowly by Mike's side.

Mike lets out a long breath and then turns to his companion, he can't help but give the wolf a glare.

"Calm? How do you expect me to stay calm after what El just told us?!" he strains gesturing towards the door El just closed, as he attempts to keep his voice hushed.

Pitch rolls his eyes at Mike, "Freaking out about what we've just been told won't help the situation, it won't help El".

Mike's chest rises and falls quickly at Pitch's words. He silently hates the beast for his rationality. No, freaking out and causing a scene *won't* help El. He secretly hates how his companion is able to make sense most of the time.

Grumbling, Mike turns back to the sink and turns on the running water, rinsing off their plates from breakfast and places them into his dishwasher, his brain mulling over everything El has shared with

him.

Once he's done with the dishes, Mike aimlessly walks towards his bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He mindlessly ruffles through his casual clothing, pulling on a pair of faded jeans and one of his favorite Star Wars t-shirts.

He moves to his bathroom and begins to brush his teeth, staring at his reflection the entire time.

"What do I do?" he asks himself. He feels as if there's everything and anything that he needs to do. Like, all the things El's lost out on in her life, he wishes he could fix everything.

"But you can't", his brain reminds him and his brushing slows.

He spits into the sink and leans into it, his brain going a mile a minute.

"But, I can make it better," he whispered to himself. And with a split decision, Mike hastily moves back to the kitchen and begins to rummage through his cabinets.

Mike has a couple of flashes of childhood memories of his mother always making him fresh hot chocolate when he was feeling down and it always seemed to cheer him up. Even though it was nowhere near winter, the thought of a warm beverage seemed to be the key.

As he pulled out a cooking pot, and the ingredients needed to make his intended drink, he stops and glances to El's door, which still remains closed.

His shoulders sag, wondering if she's okay. He glances at his microwave clock which flashes 2:02 at him.

"Give her time" Pitch states from his spot on the floor where he is curled up and lets out a short yawn.

Mike sighs, "I know" he says softly and turns back to his task at hand.

He eventually gets wrapped up in his thoughts as he continues to bustle through his kitchen. Time seems to slip away as he prepares

not just the hot chocolate for El, but also a couple plate full of snacks that he has on hand.

Just as Mike places one of his mismatched plates onto his grey speckled countertop, he freezes slightly, recalling this morning when he had handed El a plate.

He was certain the reason she had almost dropped the plate was when their hands gently brushed up against one another's. It was a lightning fast sensation that traveled all throughout his body. It seemed to happen every time they touched, and if Mike wasn't lying, he secretly enjoyed it.

His mind began to wander to when El had talked about her past shaved head, and truthfully, Mike believed that she would have looked beautiful no matter how her hair looked. But, the way her warm brown curls cascaded around her face, and the shy smile she gave him after he complimented her hair almost caused him to faint right there. He wasn't sure what this girl, who was a stranger not even twenty-four hours ago was doing to him.

Just as he finished setting up the plates with an assortment of cheese and crackers, he side glanced at the clock, which now read 2:46, and just as he moved his head to El's door, it popped open.

He startled slightly not expecting El to open it the moment he looked at the door, but he ducked his head back to the plate and only looked up when El came to stand across from him.

Lifting his head, he smiles easily, and El gives him one in return, "Hey" he says softly, giving her a quick once over.

It surprises him slightly to see her dressed in so much black, it fits her, but it also doesn't scream 'El' to him.

"Hi" she squeaks back as her mouth opened widely, as she tries to stuff the yawn that takes over.

She laughs, "Sorry, just tired" she apologizes.

Mike shakes his head, "No need to apologize, did you take a nap?"

El nods, "Yeah, I kind of drifted off there" she shrugs her shoulders.

"That's okay, this morning was a lot" his voice is gentle.

El sighs, "Mhm, and there's more where that came from" she tries to joke, but Mike can see that there's a lot weighing on her, and it's exhausting.

So, he decides to pull her from wherever her thoughts take her by raising the plate before her, she eyes it curiously, "Why don't we move to the living room, we don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. But, I got us some snacks and homemade hot chocolate too!" he winces at the excitement that finds its way to his voice.

El giggles lightly at his enthusiasm, but then her brows furrow, causing a slight concern to rifle through Mike.

She tilts her head in the most adorable way possible, "What's...hot chocolate?" she gives him a stare.

Mike tries to stop his mouth from falling open in shock, but fails to do so. He sees a light blush covering El's cheeks at her question as she shys away.

He shakes his head though, "Oh, uhm...it's this really warm drink, it's made out of milk and melted chocolate, I mean, you can by it in powder form too but this is better, and most people drink it when it's cold and-" he stops short, and laughs awkwardly, "Sorry, I'm rambling".

And at this El giggles, "It's fine, I actually prefer it when someone explains things to me instead of just ostracizing me for not knowing what they're talking about," she explains.

Mike's shoulders drop and he gives her a gentle look, he then moves towards the stove where the hot chocolate had been cooling slightly. He then divvies out two cups into his mugs he has sitting nearby.

He places them before El and her eyes widen as she peers into the mugs.

"Hold on!" Mike says excitedly as he moves towards his fridge and

removes a can of whip cream. He shakes it quickly and then squirts out two perfect swirls of whipped cream onto the warm beverage.

He picks up the leftover pieces of chocolate he shredded and sprinkles it on top.

"There! Perfect!" he steps back placing his hands on his hips proudly.

El's face lights up as a bright, genuine smile dances across her face.

"Go ahead, try it" he gestures towards the mug.

El gives him a tentative look, the smile never leaving her face as she reaches for the mug. Her eyes flash to his once again and he nods in encouragement.

With wide eyes El brings the mug to her lips and takes a small sip, her eyes glittering.

She swallows, "That's...amazing!" she cheers as she pulls the cup back to her face as she takes another drink from the mug.

She hums in contentment.

Mike watches her and can't help but feel giddy at being the first person to introduce her to his favorite drink.

When she pulls the mug away the second time though, he can't help but outwardly laugh, catching El by surprise, "What?" she asks so innocently, Mike could have melted right there.

He leans forward across his small island, and El follows suit, leaning in as well. Mike gestures towards her upper lip, "You've got cream on your lip and nose" he laughs.

El's eyes widen as she tries to wipe it away, but smudges it even more. Mike chuckles again, leaning closer to her. "Here, let me" and he slowly reaches his hand forward to the girl who freezes and watches as his hand approaches her face.

He hooks his finger and gets what's left of the cream off of her face, he's so focused on the task, he doesn't realize how close he and El are.

So, it's no surprise that both of them are met with wide eyes from each other when they realize they are only a breath away.

Their eyes meet, and Mike is astounded to see that up close El's eyes aren't just a rich amber, but they are flecked with golden sparkles that enrapture him completely. He's completely mesmerized by the woman before him.

His eyes flicker from her eyes and then unconsciously to her lips, and then back up to her eyes. He watches her eyes move, he's pretty sure they flick to his lips as well.

It could be so easily, he decides, to just lean in and...before his mind can go any further, El lets out a light giggle, pulling him from his impending thoughts. He can't help but chuckle as well, as they both duck their heads shyly, both of their cheeks lighting up to bright red. They both slowly leaned back from the counter, the interesting encounter causing them both to fluster a bit.

Mike rubs the back of his neck, "Uh, so...want to move to the living room? I've got some snacks as well" he gestures to the plate of snacks on the counter. El gives him a shy nod as she grabs her mug, and Mike follows suit, grabbing his own and then the plate of snacks.

El allows Mike to take the lead as he walks into the living room, he sets the plate of snacks down on the table, as he sits down on his small loveseat.

His eyes move to El, who seems hesitant as she stands awkwardly, not knowing where to sit.

So, Mike eliminates her uncertainty and pats the seat next to him. "Here, you can sit here" he tries to not sound awkward, but he's pretty sure that he fails miserably.

But El gives him a warm look and moves to the empty seat. She tucks her knees up underneath her and leans into the back of the couch, her mug of warm hot chocolate locked in her grip.

Mike nervously takes a sip of his own hot chocolate, and quips an eyebrow up at her, "Uhm, are you feeling better?"

El nods slowly, she holds up her mug, "This is great, makes me feel warm" she tucks her shoulders inward.

"I know right, my mom always made it for me when I felt down, I thought you might enjoy it" he shrugs sheepishly.

He watches as El face lights up, but then a frown pulls at her face, she looked down at her hands. Her thumb strokes the glass slowly, "I...I never had someone do stuff like this before, it's...nice" she comments looking back up at him.

Mike wants to take her in his arms and just hold her tight, to give her everything that she never had, but he knows right now she needs him to just be there, so, he looks at her and grins, "Well, I'm glad I'm able to make you feel better".

El hums in agreement, "You've been wonderful, Mike" she says softly, and it makes Mike's heart melt.

Before he can say anything, El continues, "I've only really had Kali in my life who's been consistent, but even after we escaped from the lab, life wasn't easy".

Mike sits rapt with attention, making sure she knows he's listening.

"Where did you go after?" he asks.

El sighs, "Well, Kali said we needed to get out of Indiana, so we-" she starts, but Mike sits up straight at her words, causing her to stop abruptly.

"Wait, Indiana?!" his voice is tight.

El gives him a curious look, "Yeah? That's where the lab was".

Mike feels a bit dumbfounded, he leans closer to her, one hand is gripping his mug firmly, the other holds up a hand between them, "You...you don't mean Hawkins...do you?" he asks slowly.

He watches as El's eyes widen, "Yes...Hawkins...Hawkins lab is where I was born" she's giving him a look of uncertainty.

It all clicks suddenly. Mike turns to place his mug on his coffee table and then leans forward in his seat rubbing his hands anxiously against his legs.

El copies his movements and leans closer to him, he feels her gentle hand rest against his shoulder, "Mike...are you okay?" she questions.

Mike nods effortlessly, as he moves his head calmly towards her. El peers at him with an anxious expression.

"Mike, what's wrong?" she says worriedly.

But, it's not nerves that has Mike feeling this way, it's a realization. He opens his mouth to speak, "Hawkins, Indiana, that's where I was born, I lived there" he can't help but let out a laugh.

He feels El's hand tightened on his shoulder.

"What?" is all she's able to choke out.

Mike shakes his head, "I grew up there, my friends and I moved to New York for college".

El pulls away from him, her body freezes.

"This...this is too weird" she laughs lightly, clapping her hands on her lap in surprise.

"Yeah, it *really* is" Mike agrees.

"So, you were there, the whole time I-" he stops short, another realization hitting him.

He runs a hand through his hair in disbelief, "Hawkins Lab, they shut that place down years ago, I remember, there was this *huge* debacle over what went on there and-" he looks at El with wide eyes.

"Dr. Brenner" he whispers.

El nods, "Papa" is what she says and Mike's heart sinks.

He can't believe it. All this time...she was *right* there, barely five miles

away.

Once again El places her hand on Mike, this time his thigh, he turns to look at her with a sad look. She gives him a soft expression, "Mike" she said gently, "There was *nothing* you could have done".

It was like she had read his mind. He swallows hard, holding back the anger for himself, for the man who abused this wonderful woman before him. His fingers tightened into fists.

"I could of" is what he says, and El shakes her head quickly.

"No. Dr. Brenner kept us locked up tight, you would've never known we were there" she says sadly.

Mike tucks his lips in tightly unable to follow how weird everything about his and El's meeting had continued to get.

"Besides...you're doing something now, whether you meant to or not" El says lightly giving Mike a smile.

He sighs, she's right, and he knows it. It's a fact that he's constantly been fighting with since he's met El.

Mike unravels his fist and moves it slowly so that he can place it on top of El's, they stare into each other's eyes.

"I promise to keep you safe," he affirms, knowing that no, he couldn't do anything before, but he could do everything now.

El's eyes widen at his declaration, he watches as her eyes glisten, and she bows her head, shyly looking at him, "Thank you Mike" she whispers.

And Mike knows right then and there he will do everything in his power to protect El.

The day passes on in a daze as she and Mike sit and continue to share their stories. El is honestly still swirling with emotions about everything that has gone on, everything that they've shared.

After the realization that Mike had grown up in Hawkins, Mike had taken that moment to go on and explain his childhood. His school, his best friends and how he and his friends all went to New York together and that he and two of them worked together.

El marveled as to how effortlessly Mike explained his childhood memories. They found themselves both with one leg up on the loveseat, turned towards one another. El propped herself up with her right elbow, resting her head gently against her hand as a smile never left her face as Mike recounted animatedly his memories.

She enjoyed the way he talked with his hands, and the way his eyes danced with a lightness she's never seen before. As he wove from one story to the next, time melted away, and so did her anxiety about the whole situation she found herself in.

He stopped at one point bashfully, rubbing the back of his neck, an adorable nervous habit she enjoyed watching. He rose to his feet and called in a pizza.

It didn't take long for the delivery to come, and El found herself and Mike curled up once again on the couch enjoying the warm, cheesy food.

Pitch and Veda had found themselves curled up by one another as she and Mike continued to talk. She immediately felt the warmth and comfort overwhelm her as both of their Anima's layed near one another, it made her feel dizzy with satisfaction.

As the night went on she had finally finished her story, recounting how she and Kali took a greyhound to Chicago, but they were only there for a couple of years before Kali had discovered that the bad men had been tailing them.

They had fled to New York and met the gang with whom they had lived with.

El then went on to talk about how Kali became obsessed with tracking down the bad men and eliminating them. Of course, she had told Mike about how Kali had abused El's power, using her to track down the men.

"That's awful El" Mike had stated, and El shrugged her shoulders.

"I know, but she's my sister, she's all I had" her voice was heavy with sadness.

Mike nods slowly.

"I have to find her" El finally states as she begins to pull at a loose string on her pants.

She hears Mike sigh heavily, he then reaches out a hand and touches her elbow, "We will El. Now that I know what's happened, I'll help you find her" he smiles warmly at her.

El softens, "I really can't thank you enough for everything you've done".

Mike gives her a pointed look, "Hey, we're in this together now, you can't get rid of me that easily".

El laughs at this and then looks at his hand, "Hey, I'm pretty sure you've told me every story about your childhood, but...you've never said anything about *your* powers".

Mike gives a half smile at this, "Yeah, I guess it's just because it's always been apart of me, my friends have known forever, and I don't use them often," he shrugs.

El nods at his explanation.

He huffs again, "I think I was born with them?" he says uncertain.

"I first found out about them when my friend Will fell off his bike and broke his wrist when we were nine" he begins to recount the memory.

"We all rushed to his side and I grabbed his arm and I remember wishing I could do something about it, then...Pitch was a frog at the time, he was just sitting on my knee, and it was like...a weird connection between us, and my hand started to glow".

"Then, Will winced in pain and, then his arm was fine" Mike shook

his head in his own disbelief.

"We didn't understand it then, but overtime I began to figure out that it had something to do with Pitch and mine's connection. You see-" he gestures to Pitch, "I can *only* use my powers when Pitch is touching me".

El frowns at this, "Really?" she questions.

Mike nods, "Yeah, and depending on the injury I can only heal so much, like your leg" he gestures to her said ligament.

"I never really practiced, only used them when necessary," he finishes.

"No one ever found out about them?" El can't help but question.

Mike shook his head, "No, you see, my friends and I have an old pact, 'friends don't lie', and we don't share each other secrets either" he smiles.

"What about your parents?" she questions.

"No, I never told them either, figured it'd be better that way".

"Safer" El adds.

"Yeah, that too" Mike agrees.

A silence falls between them, and a yawn escapes her mouth, Mike laughs.

"Tired?" he asks her gently.

She nods, but then casually glances at the clock in Mike's living room, it only read 8:37.

"I'm not ready to go to bed though," she says, her mind still reeling with all the new information.

Mike chuckles, he then reaches forward for a remote he points it at the t.v. and it flicks on.

"Here, we can watch this for awhile" he then turns to face the t.v. kicking his feet onto his coffee table.

El can't help but turn and copy Mike's movements.

His couch isn't huge, so their shoulders brush against one another. She can feel Mike's eyes on her and she looks up at him.

Their eyes meet and soft smiles grace each others features. He does a sideways nod towards the t.v. "You good with an old classic?" he asks.

El turns her head halfway, not wanting to pull her attention from Mike's face. She had enjoyed their closeness this afternoon when Mike had introduced her to hot chocolate. But, the electricity that hung between them had almost been too much for her, and so she had shyly pulled away.

Her eyes saw that The Little Mermaid was playing on the screen and she secretly smiled. She turned back to Mike and gave him a winning smile, "It's one of my favorites".

And with that, they stayed on the couch, comfortable with just each other's presence.

Okay, I know there isn't much interaction with the Anima's this chapter, but they will play a bigger role in later chapters.

What do you guys think? Kind of needed to get El's and some of Mike's background out and I hope you all liked it! I love writing Mike and El's interaction, it's my favorite part of these stories.

Again, you guys were wonderful with your reviews and I love hearing how much you enjoy this story.

So, as always, please let me know how you enjoyed this chapter by leaving a REVIEW! :)

5. A Close Encounter

WOW! Thank you all so much for the fantastic reviews! It truly makes my heart happy to see all the responses I get! Honestly, writing was something I struggled with in school, and I can't tell you how many papers I had to write during my 8 years of college. Fantasy and coming up with my own creative story is a wonderful passion that I have, and I also love delving into other authors stories on fanfiction websites. There's something truly unique about fanfiction and it's amazing to be apart of this world. So, thank you all again!

Get ready for some Mileven fluff as well!

Anyways, on with this next chapter!

Disclaimer: I don't own anything!

June 16th, 1993

Sweat is pouring down her face, the salty residue stinging her eyes, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath.

"Again! You. Must. Try. HARDER, ELEVEN!" his voice is like razor blades against her ears.

She takes in a shuddering breath, raising her head slightly, she can see through the two way mirror, her eyes meet his.

His eyes, fiery, but at the same time cool as ice, wide with greed and impatience.

His companion is tight around his neck, almost like a wool scarf for the winter. The weasel gives her the same beady stare.

A shiver runs up her spine.

"Eleven!" he barks at her, causing her to stumble slightly on her unstable legs that feel like jelly beneath her.

"Do as your told, or you know what will happen!" he growls, pointing to

his left.

She lets out a strained cry as she turns to the other room beside her.

"El!" a little voice squeaks and El's heart breaks.

There, her Anima laid trapped, a burly man holding a cattle prod to the companion's side.

"Don't" El whimpers, tears pricking at the corner of her eyes.

"Then do as your-" but the man doesn't finish.

El whips her head to the man, everything seems frozen, there's no sound, no nothing.

She furrows her brows. And then, everything around her seems to hum, and it all washes away.

El holds up her hands, blocking the blinding light that envelops her. She starts to shake, not knowing what's going on.

Slowly, she lowers her hands and it's different.

Now, everything around her is a rich green. Her eyes scanned around her new environment. She's in a lush forest. The birds are chirping, and the sun cascades around her, the warmth envelops her and for once she feels her body relax.

"El, come on!" she feels a tug on her elbow.

Startled, El turns to the familiar voice, and her heart hums, when she sees it's him. The rich dark eyes, the tangle of deep black hair, his lopsided smile.

He's pulling her along, and El follows like a lost puppy.

Their laughing as they run together, their hands intertwined, as if that's how they're always meant to be.

She follows him up a hill, and they come to a stop at the peak. He turns to her, and it's only love she sees on his face.

Her face flushes at the realization, and does so even more when he reaches forward a gentle hand and places it delicately on her face.

He begins to tilt his head down towards hers, and she immediately pushes herself forward. Her eyes flutter close as she feels his breath mingling with her own.

Their lips meet.

With a quick intake of breath El's eyes open widely, and she blinks away the dream and sleep that still remains.

She doesn't move as she slowly takes in her surroundings. Her body is incredibly warm, but not in a bad way, she feels comfortable and at ease.

Her eyes scanned her environment as she recognizes the couch and small living room quickly.

'*Right*' her brain reminds her, she's at Mike's place.

She settles slightly, but is immediately put on high alert when a movement comes from beneath her.

As fast as lightning, she moves her head and her eyes widen once again when she realizes *why* she is so warm and comfortable: she's curled up into Mike's embrace.

'*We must have fallen asleep!*' her voice screams through her head. She clearly remembers them sitting *very* close to one another as they watched the The Little Mermaid on Mike's t.v.

She faintly remembers unconsciously singing along to her favorite songs, Mike looking at her in awe, not saying anything, but then smiling that gorgeous smile of his as he began to sing right alongside her.

Truthfully, she couldn't believe it, and after finishing 'A Part of Your World', she couldn't help but tease him slightly. He tried to hold it to the fact that he had a *much* younger sister that he watched a lot, and with that came hours of Disney movies.

She remembers settling into Mike's side comfortably, and him not saying anything to her closeness, which made her grin with glee. It was just after 'Kiss The Girl' did El's eyes begin to get heavy with sleep, her thoughts mingling with what it would be like if she and Mike were in Ariel's and Eric's place.

Now, she found herself very aware of how close she and Mike were *now*. She's not sure how it had happened but Mike's body was tilted to the far end of the couch, his long legs stretched out.

She must have followed his movements in the night because her body laid half across his upper chest, while her knees were bent into his. Honestly, she's not sure how either of them had managed to stay comfortable like this throughout the entire night, but, to El, aside from the first part of her horrible dream, she had slept soundly, more so than she ever had in her life.

While she processes this throughout her mind, Mike lets out a deep exhale, his breath reaching El's face, and she's wondering if that's what had awoken her. She can't help but to take this moment and just lay there.

Something about Mike alured her as her eyes greedily scanned his face, once again marveling at his freckles, she's pretty sure she has a dopey grin upon her face.

But, she sighs heavily, feeling as if she should probably move and not let this moment get any awkward. So, she begins to rise, but she's stopped immediately by a force, Mike shifts, "Dn...no...dn...go" his face furrows and El realizes that Mike's left arm is looped around her back and he's holding her firmly against him.

He's not letting her go anywhere. El huffs, but she can't help but feel slightly joyful at the feeling of Mike holding her tightly, and not allowing her to move.

Truthfully, she would have allowed him to just hold her there until he awoke, but, there's a pressing need of her bladder, and she needs to get up.

So, as much as she wants to stay in Mike's arms, she scoots forward

so her face is level with his, and she begins to shake his shoulder with her free arm.

"Mike" she says softly, jostling him lightly.

"Hmmm" he groans, his face scrunching in a way that makes El's heart swoon.

She can't help but giggle "Miiiike" she sing songs again.

"What" he grumbles, and El realizes that the man beneath her is *not* a morning person.

"I...I uh...need to get up" her voice a little louder this time.

This time El watches as Mike's eyes begin to stir beneath his eyelids, and they finally flutter open. She's met with his dark eyes, and his face scrunches up, but then softens.

El freezes in the next moment as Mike's hand comes up and brushes away her stray, frizzing hair from her face, "Pretty" he whispers as his eyes scanned her face.

She's pretty sure she flushes a million shades of red at the compliment, she lets out a nervous giggle, "Uh, Mike?"

And at this, it seems Mike is finally brought back from the realm of sleep. He blinks hurriedly a couple of times before shaking his head.

"El?" his voice is full of confusion and heavy from sleep.

She nods at him, "Yeah, uhm, hi, we uh...we fell asleep" she shrugs her shoulders.

Mike blinks again, "We did?" he asks.

El nods her head again, "Yeah, and uhm...I need to go to the bathroom but-" she then tries to move and then Mike's eyes are *wide* open realizing he's holding her down with one arm while his other hand is still resting on her cheek.

El smiles shyly at him.

"Oh my gosh!" he then says, moving so that they both sit up together, his arms moving away from her quickly.

His face erupts into a brilliant shade of red.

"I-I-I'm sorry!" he says guiltily as he gestures between them. "I didn't mean to hold you like that" he shakes his head.

El eyes him, but then giggles, "It's okay Mike, it's not like we meant for that to happen" she shrugs.

Mike peeks up at her, his face still very red, and El wants to reassure him, so she gives him a gentle smile, "Besides, it's not a bad way to wake up".

And at her words Mike brightens, "Really?" he asks, and El nods shyly, "Yeah, it was nice" and now she's sure her face is as red as his.

"I usually have nightmares, and I started to have one but...it changed, it was...nice" she whispered, her eyes meeting his and now she's really embarrassed because what she was referring to as nice in her dream was the moment their lips touched.

She then shakes her head, standing while tucking her stray hair behind her ear.

"I, just need to run to the bathroom real quick" she then gestures to the spare bedroom.

Mike nods, ruffling his own hair, "Yeah, yeah no worries, I'll...see you in a bit" and El can't help but hide her giggle as Mike winces at his own words as El gives him one last wave before she disappears behind the corner.

She lets go of the breath she doesn't realize that she's holding the moment she walks into the spare bedroom, making her way to the bathroom slightly dizzy from the way Mike looked at her.

After she's done in the bathroom, El can't help but be startled when a familiar voice breaks her from her thoughts, as she walks back into the bedroom, "Well, you looked comfy this morning" Veda sits stoically on the bed, a knowing look gracing her features.

El huffs, barely giving her companion a second look as she walks over to her bag to retrieve her clothes for the day.

"I don't know what you're talking about" she tries to sound nonchalant, but she knows she fails miserably.

Veda lets out a barking laugh, "Oh, as if I can't feel what you're feeling right now".

El freezes wincing slightly.

"You're rapidly beating heart, your nervous demeanor, and...the thrill of happiness and dare I say, enchantment, that is coursing through you?" the fox now moves to swirl about El's legs.

Even though El has always enjoyed that no matter where she went in life, she *always* had someone by her side. The only problem was, her companion knew everything about her. El couldn't hide her feelings well, not that she could honestly hide them from her Anima anyways.

El fiddles with her only other shirt that she managed to grab from the warehouse nervously between her hands. She looks down at the fox who is already staring back at her.

"Well, what about you? Cozying up to Pitch like that?" El tries to defend herself and the fox only grins more.

"I'm a figment of your soul, as is Pitch to Mike, we are drawn to one another as our humans are to each other".

El can't help but blink at her companion's words.

"What?" is all she can say, her hands falling to her sides.

"El, there's a mutual attraction between the both of you, Pitch and I wouldn't be drawn to one another if there wasn't" Veda muses.

El feels her face flush slightly, "Mike...likes me?" her voice is uncertain.

Veda shrugs, "Maybe, I'm just saying, when two Anima's are drawn to one another, it's not usually because we hate each other" she jokes.

El takes in Veda's words, sitting down on the bed, feeling a bit dumbstruck.

She glanced over her shoulder to look out the halfway closed door, in which the kitchen is partially visible, knowing that Mike is out there.

Her heart hums within her chest, not sure she knows *how* she's supposed to feel.

Mike, the man who rescued her barely two days ago, a complete stranger, and now...now she felt something entirely new, something she's never felt before.

And before she can even finish the thought, she stands to her feet, heart pounding and body shaking, El tries to push away the feeling that came to her mind.

Grabbing ahold of the t-shirt she wore yesterday and pulling it over her head, her mind still racing as she dressed for the day.

He's pretty sure he's never felt this embarrassed in his life.

Sure, Mike being who he is has had a healthy dose of embarrassing moments throughout his life. But, this was completely different, for, he had fallen asleep with a girl he barely knew and kept her wrapped in his arms most of the night.

He's not one hundred percent sure how they ended up in their predicament, but he faintly remembers them cozied up on his couch watching *The Little Mermaid*.

Mike had enjoyed the way El sung along to the songs, knowing them by heart. He was enraptured by her smooth, gentle voice as her eyes lit up watching the movie.

He had caught himself staring at the girl who was lightly pressed into his side, and found himself unable to pull away.

When she caught him staring, he couldn't help but smile, and begin to sing along with her.

His heart filled with excitement at the way she brightened as they sung along together. Yes, he knew he didn't have the greatest singing voice, but he couldn't ignore the way their voices seemed to meld together into a unique harmony.

She had picked on him slightly, poking him in the side for knowing the songs from a children's movie. He knew she was picking and he was happy that he *did* have his little sister to blame for his knowledge on most Disney movies.

But, El didn't care, as they continued to sing along softly to the next couple of songs.

He couldn't help but flush when the song 'Kiss the Girl' came on screen, and El was silent as she watched with heavy lids the scene unfold before them.

Truthfully, after their little hot chocolate incident, the thought of kissing her was something that continued to weave itself in and out of his mind. There was something about El that intrigued him in more ways than not. It was a feeling he had never experienced before.

Even though El was a brand new person in his life, it was as if he felt like he had known her somehow, yet he had only a glimpse as to who she was, what she had gone through.

Eventually, Mike felt a soft pressure against his shoulder and he glanced down. El's head had fallen against his shoulder, and peeking down at her, he could see that she was asleep.

A gentle smile graced his lips as he took in her serene expression, her breathing soft.

As carefully as he could, Mike reached around with his right arm and tugged at the blanket that hung on the couch.

He then tossed the it over both of them, creating a warm cocoon. El then snuggled deeper into his presence, and Mike's heart quickened. He sighed softly as he slowly rested his head against hers, desperately hoping that she wouldn't mind.

And it didn't take him long to pass out either.

Then, the next thing he knew, he was being rustled from a *very* peaceful dream that involved him and El as the stars.

He could remember in the dream how they laughed together, their hands mingling together, the happiness that connected them together.

Only to be interrupted by an incessant shaking. Barely coming out of his dream state, he could feel a warm pressure against him trying to move away, but it was so comfortable he didn't want it to go away.

So, he pulled it back against him. However, when the shaking and a familiar voice became a bit more distinct, he finally began to wake.

And when his eyes groggily opened he was met by the most beautiful sight in the world, a sight that he wanted to be graced with each time he awoke.

The woman spoke to him in a gentle voice as she smiled at him. Her hair dancing in his face, he couldn't resist and raised a hand to push it back slightly, revealing the beautiful woman's full face.

"Pretty" the words flowed effortlessly from his mouth.

And he watched the woman blush at his words as she still tried to rouse him from his disoriented state.

"Uh...Mike?" finally he recognized the voice.

"El?" he had asked.

And it was then he realized he had trapped the poor girl in his embrace.

So, with flushing cheeks, he very quickly awoke fully and pushed them both to a sitting position, apologizing profusely to the girl.

He was pretty sure she was going to see him as some creep, or weirdo as his head began to fill with doubt.

But then, she smiled.

"It's okay Mike, it's not like we meant for that to happen" she shrugged giggling at him.

Mike had peeked a look at her, and then her next words *really* hit him, "Besides, it's not a bad way to wake up".

He felt his heart soar, "Really?" he asked, while El nodded shyly, "Yeah, it was nice".

And then he was pretty sure he was on cloud nine. A beautiful woman had just reassured him that it was okay they had slept together and she thought it was nice.

He sat there dumbfounded for a bit as El excused herself to the bathroom, his eyes following her the entire way.

Once she was around the corner, Mike flopped his back into the couch cushions sighing softly.

He would have gladly stayed in his room if Pitch didn't start laughing at him.

Mike lifted his head quickly and glared at his companion who had risen to his feet, shaking his fur straight.

"What are you laughing at?" Mike grumbled.

Pitch shook his burly head, "Oh, nothing" he said approaching Mike, his tail swishing higher than usual.

"Just, seems that you two were getting pretty comfy with one another" he gives Mike a look.

Mike reaches out and pushes his companion's head teasingly, "Shut up" he growls, casting a quick glance at the spare bedroom, making sure El wasn't approaching him.

"Ah, you totally enjoyed that, didn't you?" Pitch continues to tease him.

Mike tries to hide the blush that he knows is starting to form on his face once again, as he silently wishes he wasn't so fair skinned.

But then, he bites back, "Yeah, and what about you and Veda?" he raises an eyebrow to the wolf who shrugs nonchalantly.

"Why do you think that happened?" Pitch's question causes Mike to stir slightly.

"What do you mean?" Mike asks.

Pitch sighs, "Mike, Veda and I are an extension on yours and El's souls, what you feel, we feel, it's only natural for us to be drawn to one another if you two are".

Mike ponders Pitch's statement within his head. '*Does El like me?*' the thought echoed through his mind.

But, before he can think too much of it, not wanting to get his hopes up, Mike huffs and stands to his feet quickly.

His socked feet pad quietly through his apartment as he stops in the kitchen, for some reason he turns towards the spare bedroom, and his eyes widen at the sight he sees.

He knows he should look away, that he shouldn't be ogling the most beautiful woman he's seen in his life, but he can't tear his eyes away.

Just through the small crack he see's El, he can hear her light voice whispering, he assumes to Veda, when she suddenly reaches down her stomach and pulls her shirt off of her body. For a couple of seconds, as El fiddles with a new shirt, Mike is allowed to see El in a state that should be reserved for only the person she chooses.

And he *knows* his pupils are blown as he takes in her slight, lean figure, her dark bra against her tanned skin. He feels a different stirring within him that is a bit more different than the beginning initial attraction he had begun to feel for the girl.

Now, seeing her like this, he is somewhat ashamed to feel excited in a more intimate way, especially since El has no idea what he's doing. Even though it's only a couple of seconds that Mike watches her,

takes her in, as she pulls a new shirt over her head, adjusting her flowing brown hair behind her, Mike can't breathe.

El turns away and Mike finally blinks.

"Woah, even *I* felt that all the way to my-" Pitch starts, but then Mike shushes him quickly, because the spare bedroom door opens and El pads out, her eyes immediately finding his.

He doesn't know what to do, because he's just seen her with her shirt off, and it's doing things to him he's not proud of.

El casts him a curious look, "You okay? Your face is all red" she then points her finger around her face to demonstrate her question.

Mike blinks a couple of times before he shakes his head, "Oh! Uhm...yeah...yeah...no...I'm, okay I'm just...uh-" his stupid male brain is lacking all coordination now, especially since it traitorously wants to keep imagining El without her shirt on.

"Uh-" he tries again and now El is laughing at his stuttering.

"I'm...I'm just going to go change real quick" he states quickly pointing to the direction of his room, feeling El's eyes on him as he leaves.

Shutting the door behind him, Mike lets out a long breath, trying to gain his senses. But, he can't, not after what he just saw.

So, with one last huff of breath, Mike stands to his feet and rushes to his shower throwing it on the coldest setting possible, willing his thoughts of El to drain away.

She finds it slightly weird the way Mike acts when she enters the kitchen. He seemed to be embarrassed for some reason, and she begins to overthink as Mike hurriedly disappeared behind his bedroom door.

Her face falls believing that he was uncomfortable with what had occurred between them this morning.

"Don't worry so much" Pitch's voice brought her back to the present moment.

"Excuse me?" she furrows her brow to the dark wolf who sits licking his paw.

He laughs, "Apparently it's something you both have in common, you worry too much about what other people think," he casts a heavy look in her direction.

"What do you mean?" she approaches the Anima slowly.

He shakes his head, sighing before he speaks, "It's not for me to say but-" and then he looks past El's leg, and El follows his gaze, which lands on Veda, who's giving the wolf a *very* pointed look.

Pitch huffs, "It's something for both of you to figure out. You'll get there eventually. But, I wouldn't worry about Mike, he enjoys your company" the wolf says smoothly as he moves past El to lay on his bed.

El isn't quite sure what the wolf was getting at, but the way he tried to calm her down from her own traitorous thoughts, it seemed to work. She could feel her shoulders dropping in relief, it was a weird sensation. Of course she had multiple interactions with Anima's in her life, but there was something different about the way Pitch spoke to her.

It was calming, and reassuring. His voice delicate, almost as if he knew *just* how to calm El down from her previous state. In one way, it was pleasant, in another, it was terrifying.

But before El could think too much on the situation, Mike's bedroom door opened, and her attention went to the man who exited the room. He gave her a shy smile, and El couldn't help but swoon slightly at his appearance.

His hair was damp and curled in a million more directions than it did when it was dry. He was wearing another graphic t-shirt, this one displaying a large pixelated dragon breathing fire down onto a knight. His pants were faded and baggy, and hung off his hips in such

an alluring way that El felt her stomach knot.

He approached her slowly, "Hey" he said nodding to her a small smile teasing across his face, "You okay, your face is-" he stops, and gestures just as she did earlier, she watches him hold back a laugh as she takes a sudden inhale of breath, clasping both of her hands onto her probably red cheeks.

"Oh!" she starts as she shakes her head, trying to fight the blush she knows is there.

"Yeah, I'm-" she stops, thinking of what she should say, but then, something overtakes her and she takes a step into a very unfamiliar zone.

"I'm just not used to seeing such an-" and she stops, thinking of the right word without coming off as too forward, but then Mike tilts his head in such an adorable way that it flows effortlessly from her mouth, "Such a handsome man...is all" and she watches as Mike's eyebrows lift so high they almost disappeared into his hairline.

His face lights up once again, but he ducks his head as he once again displays that dopey smile she's come to adore.

"You...you think I'm handsome?" he asked taking a step towards her, his hands rooted into his pockets.

El follows his lead, moving towards him as well as she fiddles with the hemline of her shirt, sneaking a glance up at him.

And now, they're barely a foot away from each other, and El feels her heart hammering against her ribcage, even more so when Mike looks at her once again.

It's as if he's taking her all in, like a delicate photograph, and El melts at his gaze.

He laughs lightly, "I've never been called handsome before, only by my mom or a family member" he brings one of his hands out of his pocket, ruffling it through his damp hair.

It's El's turn to duck her head slightly but then looks back up at him,

with which she hopes is an endearing look she so wants him to see. "Well, that's too bad, because you are, and-" she smiles up at him, in which she returns.

She has no idea where this type of bravery is coming from, it's completely foreign to her. But, there's something about Mike that makes her want to tell him everything, to let him know exactly what she's starting to feel.

"And, you're really sweet, and cute too" she shrugs shyly.

Mike's eyes widen at her words, he moves just a breath closer, their eyes not leaving each other's. And El's a bit surprised when Mike's hands find hers, and it's like everything makes sense in the world.

"Well, you're wonderful too, and...really pretty" he lets out a nervous laugh as he intertwines their fingers together.

It's there, in that space that El feels everything all at once. Even though it's only been two days that she's spent with Mike, it's felt like a lifetime. And she can tell that he feels it too.

There's an undeniable pull between them, and even though she's tried to desperately shrug it off. That this wasn't something that was normal, you didn't fall for people you just met, but here she was, eating her words. It's as if Mike had always been waiting for her, and now was her chance.

Mike continues to give her a gentle look. His eyes flicker to her lips, and she does the same.

He's a bit taller than her, so when he begins to bend down, she feels herself pushing against her tiptoes, wanting to meet him halfway.

She's never shared a kiss with anyone before, and even though her heart had always told her to wait, she felt that this was different.

Her eyes begin to flutter close and she feels Mike's warm breath against her skin. She holds back a soft whimper as she feels them coming closer together, their lips just grazing.

"MIKE! MIKE!" a very loud voice followed by an onslaught of loud

banging makes both El and Mike to spring apart as if struck by lightning, their eyes wide looking at one another.

El panics for two reasons, one: because she and Mike had almost kissed, and she was quite annoyed by the voice outside Mike's door, and two: the someone who was pounding on Mike's door could be *anyone* and her mind began to remind her why she was in Mike's apartment in the first place: to stay safe.

Mike immediately sees El's panicked expression and he holds out both his hands, trying to calm her down, "Hey, sorry, don't worry, it's just my friend Dustin, I don't-" he tries to explain, but then another onslaught of slamming comes against his door and both of them turn to look at the source of the sound.

"Dude, come on, open up, I know you're in there!" Dustin's muffled voice trails through.

Mike lets out a frustrated sigh, turning back to El, "Uh, look, I'll just go out there and send him off, I'll just be a second" he tries to reassure her, but she's frozen in shock.

Mike softens, bringing a gentle hand to her face, and El's eyes meet him, "Don't worry, Dustin's harmless, I won't let anything happen to you".

His voice is endearing, and El can only nod in understanding, Mike gives her a reassuring smile and departs for his door.

Mike waits for the pounding to stop, before he yanked the door open and moves so quickly, El only has a split second to hear his friend from the other side, "Dude, what the-" but the voices are lost the moment Mike closes the door behind him.

"El, hey, you okay?" Veda pads over to her quickly, and El can only shudder, "Yeah...yeah, I'm okay".

But, El knows she's not convincing and Veda opens her mouth to speak, when a commotion from the other side of the door, brings their attention to it.

There's some weird jiggling and a quick pound on the door that

causes El to jump, when suddenly the door is thrown open, and El can only stand in her spot, frozen, when a curly haired man followed by a disgruntled looking Mike tumble through the door.

Once they recover, the curly haired man smiles widely at her as their eyes meet.

"Dustin, you can't just come barging in here-!" Mike begins to yell, when his friend slaps him on the back laughing.

"I was so right, you *are* hiding a girl in your apartment!" the curly haired man laughs boldly and Mike can only turn to El and give her an apologetic look, as Mike shuts the door behind him.

El can only remain stagnant in her spot as the man approaches her with his hand outstretched, "Hey, I'm Dustin, one of Mike's friends, and you must be his new girlfriend" his voice is light and teasing.

"Dustin!" Mike growls as the man stops just before her, Mike hot on his heels, pushing the man away from her.

"Dude! What's your problem?" Dustin gives Mike a quick look as Mike comes to stand by El, which she is greatly appreciative for as she slowly sinks into his side.

Mike holds up a hand, "Dustin" he starts slowly, "There's a lot here that you don't understand" Mike gives his friend a tight look.

Dustin guaffs at him, "Mike, you don't have to be so secretive if you have a girlfriend, you know we'd all understand" he quirked an eyebrow up at Mike.

Mike rolls his eyes, "It's more than that Dustin it's...it's-" and he then lets out a long breath. And El can see that he's struggling because, even though she feels a little giddy on the inside that Mike didn't deny that she was his girlfriend, not that they were but something about it made her insides swirl, but he was trying to respect her own boundaries with everything she had told him.

So, El pushes her slight fear aside and places a gentle hand on Mike's arm, he then turns to look at her, and she gives him a knowing smile, and a quick wink.

She turns to Dustin and offers her hand, "I'm El, it's nice to meet you".

And with that Dustin beams as he grabs her hand, shaking it quickly, "El, what a lovely name! Mike, you sure know how to pick them!"

And with one last huff from Mike, El can't help but giggle at his awkwardness as she has just met one of Mike's dearest friends.

Okay, the ending was a little trickier than I thought it would be because I wasn't sure how I wanted that last bit of interaction to go, but I think I know where I want to go from here.

I know it's weird that Mike and El have only known each other for a couple of days and things are already moving along, but there's a reason behind that, so I hope you all don't think it's too fast or anything.

But again, thank you so much for the last chapter's reviews, and I'd really hope to hear what you all think of this one as well!

So, PLEASE REVIEW! I love hearing what you think! :)

6. An Explanation

Once again, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU for the fantastic reviews! You are all wonderful! And I'm so happy that you enjoyed the last chapter! It was fun to bring Dustin into the story and now things are really going to start happening as well! So, I hope you all enjoy this next chapter!

Please read my little blurb at the end as well! :)

Disclaimer: I don't own anything.

June 16th, 1993

He's never actually *wanted* to kill anyone in his life, but he's pretty sure he gets fairly close to feeling this way the moment Dustin begins to pound on his door. Interrupting his and El's moment.

He honestly couldn't believe how fast things had progressed between the two of them. And when he exited his room, freshly showered and not feeling as overwhelmed by his thoughts of El, he realized that he was only kidding himself the moment his eyes settled on her.

It surprised him to see El's eyes widen when he approached her. The look was unfamiliar with him, never really having this kind of closeness with a girl in his life. Her face was soft, but her gaze was full of interest, he couldn't help but watch as her eyes roamed his body.

And the feeling of awe washed over him like a bucket of cold water.

'El's checking me out, and...I think she likes what she sees', his overcocky male brain teased him, and he quickly tried to push the thought away from the forefront of his mind. But then he saw her face redden suddenly, and he couldn't help but pick on her slightly.

So, with a quick wit, he mimicked her gesture from this morning when she caught him red faced in the kitchen.

He loves the look she gives him, all shy and coy. But, her next words take his breath away.

'*Handsome*', the word engulfs his brain and shuts it down momentarily as he processes what she had just said to him.

Mike had only been called handsome by family members, never by a stunning woman who was gazing at him with such affection.

And then she called him '*Cute*', with such a shy atonement, and he then found himself gravitating towards the girl. Her words tugging him closer, wanting to drown in everything she had to say. He couldn't help but call her '*Pretty*', in return, because she was. Honestly, she was beautiful, stunning, ravishing, any word he could think of, but for some reason, pretty, just seemed to fit her.

Then, he took both of her hands in his and intertwined them together. They fit perfectly, like they were always meant to be. She didn't pull away, no, she crept closer to him as well.

Their eyes meet in a tender gaze, he looks away for just a moment to look down at her lips, and he knows *exactly* what he wants to do. And flicking his gaze back up to hers, he watches in awe as she does the same to him.

Taking a deep breath, Mike begins to lower himself towards the girl before him, and he feels her pushing upwards to meet him in the middle.

His heart sings, not believing that El, a woman who has just entered his life could even want a guy like him. But, he follows the pull that is nearly irresistible, his eyes flutter shut, and their lips ghost each other slightly. And then, their moment is rapidly pulled away from them when his idiotic friend bangs on the door.

Mike's irritated beyond belief as he scowls at the door, and wishes he could just will Dustin to go away. But then he looks back to El who seems terrified, he attempts to reassure her, by giving her a warm look, a quick squeeze of both of her hands, and a promise that he will tell his friend to take a hike, and they can then return to whatever was happening between them.

Hastily, he approaches his apartment door and yanked it open, and barely leaves himself enough room to slink out. Dustin is right there,

a surprised look on his face as Mike places both of his hands onto Dustin's shoulders and pushes him away from the door, and with a swift kick of his leg, the door slams behind them.

"Mike, what the hell?" Dustin curses as Mike guides him away from his apartment.

Mike gives Dustin a glare as he removes his hands from his friends shoulders.

"Dustin, what the hell are you doing here!?" Mike gives the man a disgruntled look.

Dustin shakes his head wildly, and his shaggy Anima steps forward as well, "Mike, you seem startled?" Dart gives him an incredulous look.

Mike tries to neutralize his face, realizing then that he is acting weird.

But, he fails miserably as panic fills his body, and he's sure he gives his feelings away immediately as his face falls.

"Yeah, man, you're acting really weird" Dustin gives him a once over.

"Uhm...no I'm not" Mike tries to play it off, but Dustin gives him a half smirk as he crosses his arms in front of him.

He gestures towards Mike's now closed apartment door, "What are you hiding in there?" a light tease dances on his words.

Mike pales, and Dustin springs at his reaction, "You're totally hiding something in your apartment!" he moves quickly, but Mike is quicker as he holds his friend back.

"I'm not hiding anything!" Mike tries to argue as Dustin pushes him back against the door, slamming roughly against it, as Dustin tries to fish around his side to grab ahold of the handle.

"Dude, you totally are! If you weren't you wouldn't be trying to hold me back!" Dustin laughs in Mike's face as he tries to hold his friend back.

"What are you hiding, a girl or something?" Dustin jokes once again, but his words cut Mike deep, knowing that his words were true.

Even though Mike has height to his advantage, Dustin is built a bit larger, which allows him to finally grab ahold of Mike's arm that is gripped firmly around the handle of the door, and Dustin forces it just right, causing Mike to yelp slightly, as Dustin pushes them both through the door.

They stumble into his apartment, barely catching themselves so that they don't tumble to the ground.

Mike's anger washed over him, as he tried to scold his friend for just barging into his home uninvited.

And then, Dustin is teasing him about *actually* hiding a girl in his apartment, when Dustin's eyes settle onto El, who is looking at them both with wide eyes.

Her gaze flicks to Mike's, and he can see that she's nervous, she has no idea who this man is. Mike gives her a soft apologetic look, and he watches her soften slightly.

He's slightly annoyed when Dustin approaches her quickly, as El freezes slightly as he approaches her. So, Mike steps in quickly, pushing Dustin away slightly, as Mike moves to El's side, a wave of protectiveness washing over him. He warms as he feels El move into his embrace slightly.

"Dude! What's your problem?" Dustin gives Mike a quick look.

Mike's not really sure *where* to begin, so with a heavy breath, he holds up a hand, "Dustin" he starts slowly, "There's a lot here that you don't understand" Mike gives his friend a tight look.

Dustin guaffs at him, "Mike, you don't have to be so secretive if you have a girlfriend, you know we'd all understand" he quirked an eyebrow up at Mike.

Mike rolls his eyes, and he knows his cheeks are flushing at Dustin's words, but he pushes that to the side for now, "It's more than that Dustin it's...it's-" and he then lets out a long breath. He really doesn't

know what to say.

Truthfully, he was hoping to have a conversation with El about possibly talking to his friends about their situation. But, Dustin seems to have pushed that conversation out the window. Now, he doesn't know what he should do without revealing too much that El might not want discussed.

But, before he can think to further on the matter, he feels a gentle hand on his arm, he then turns to look down at El and she's giving him a knowing smile, and then she flashes him a quick wink. His heart stutters in his chest as she watches the girl move forward, a new type of confidence radiating from her.

She turns to Dustin and offers her hand, "I'm El, it's nice to meet you", her voice is sweet.

And with that Dustin beams as he grabs her hand, shaking it quickly, "El, what a lovely name! Mike, you sure know how to pick them!"

Mike huffs at his friend, as El giggles and gives him a tender look from over her shoulder.

El drops Dustin's hand and then returns to Mike's side. She raises a hand and places it delicately on Mike's shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze, a simple gesture letting him know that it's okay.

Mike feels himself soften slightly, as he turns to look at the girl beside her, both giving each other a small smile.

"Huh, wow, you guys are *definitely* smitten with one another" Dustin's teasing voice pulls the two back from their own little world.

Mike gives his friend a dirty look, in which Dustin quirks an eyebrow up at his friend. Mike doesn't even chance a look at El, because he's pretty sure she's probably just as embarrassed as he is.

"Dustin" Mike grumbles lowly. "Why don't we go talk for a minute" Mike states through gritted teeth as he moves towards his friend and takes him roughly by the shoulder.

"Hey, watch the jacket!" Dustin cries as Mike leads him away.

Mike turns his head back slightly to El, "We'll be right back" he says lightly and the girl gives him a small smile, nodding in understanding.

Once both he and Dustin are through in his bedroom, Mike shuts the door, and slowly turns to his friend, whom he can't help but give a murderous glare.

Dustin is all smiles as he mozies around Mike's room.

"Dustin, what the hell are you doing here anyways?" Mike shakes his head at his friend, throwing his hands up into the air.

His friend laughs, "Dude, don't you remember? You said you wanted to meet up this weekend, well...it's Sunday", he gave him an exasperated look.

Mike slowly lowers his arms, as his face falls slightly.

'*Right*' he mentally face palms himself. He *had* told Dustin that he had wanted them to meet up before Monday.

But, that was before *everything* that had happened to him, that was before he met El, only a mere 48 hours ago.

He runs shaking hands through his mess of black hair. '*Had it been only two days since he met El?!*' his mind races. It had felt like a lifetime for him because he was starting to not believe he had been truly living before he met her. Now, everything felt surreal.

"Wow, you've got it *bad*" Dustin drawls as he moves to pat Mike on the back in sympathy.

Mike meets his friends eyes, "It's not what you think" he tries to defend. Because, yes, he was pretty certain that both he and El had the same idea before Dustin interrupted them.

However, now that Mike was separated from the girl who changed his whole perspective on life, he now had a million questions flowing through his head. Like, was the almost kiss something that was prompted only by the passion of their flirting, or was it something entirely else?

Mike wasn't sure if the emotions and life stories they had shared between one another had caused this reaction between them. For, with the depth of everything El had shared with him, he was bound to respond and empathize with her. Was he just acting on his primal male instincts?

'No', his heart fluttered in his chest. It wasn't *just* human instinct, it was something else, and he knew that. But, now with a rational mind in place, he figured he should probably discuss it further with El, but not until he got rid of his friend first.

Dustin's giving him an interesting look, "Then, my good friend, what in the world did I walk in on? You've *never* had a girl in your apartment, sans your sisters and Max" he shrugs his shoulders.

Mike sighs, he didn't really know how to explain it, not without telling Dustin everything.

"Look" Mike says holding his hands up, "I can't tell you *everything*, not without El's permission", he begins to explain.

"Mike, friends don't lie" Dustin utters their parties most held up rule.

"I know...I know" Mike says slowly, rubbing a hand across his face, contemplating his next words.

"I honestly can't tell you, not without El's permission, I don't want to..." he falters, wanting to say, "*Betray her trust*", when that's what he was doing to one of his oldest friends.

But Dustin beats him to his next words, "Ruin your chances with the first girl you've acknowledged that you actually like?" he chuckles.

Mike rolls his eyes at his friends forwardness, but he chooses to not get wrapped up in his teasing, "Yes, whatever Dustin, just...just give me a moment to talk with her first. And if she's okay with it, then I'll tell you".

Dustin seemed to ponder this for a moment, placing a finger just below his chin as his eyes wander upwards as he hums in consideration.

Mike knows he's just trying to be a pest, but he allows his friend to have his moment.

The curly haired man then nods quickly, "Alright, I'll give you and your lady friend, some time alone" he lowers his voice, as he wiggles his fingers into Mike's face, who swats the hands away.

"Thanks", Mike grumbles as he moves towards his door.

"Oh, I guess this would be bad timing then!" Dustin calls out and Mike whips around to give his friend a confused look.

"Bad time for what?" he shrugs his shoulders.

"Uh, I kind of told the others to come over too, ya know, for morale support" Dustin gives him a sheepish grin.

Mike's mouth falls open quickly in shock.

"Dustin, seriously!" Mike cries out, his hands going back to pulling at his hair, not sure how he was going to explain this all to El, and possibly his whole gang of friends.

She wasn't exactly sure what to think of Mike's friend, but she definitely knows that he isn't afraid to state his mind.

The multiple comments about her and Mike caused her cheeks to erupt in flames, and she could easily see that Mike was in the same boat everytime he cast a small look in her direction.

It was easy to see that Mike was flustered about the whole situation.

Sure, she had spilled her entire back story to him, and Mike was more than willing to help her out. But now, now they were both thrown into a whirlwind of uncertainty now that Dustin had seen them together.

She knew Mike had hastily taken his friend behind closed doors to try to smooth out some of the details. They were caught in the crossfire of everything that had happened between them.

From Dustin's point of view she was probably seen as some girl that Mike had decided to take home with him. But, from what Mike had let on with some of their conversations, he didn't seem to be *that* type of guy, in which El was secretly happy about, but she kept that to herself.

She could hear their muffled voices from behind Mike's closed door, her eyes glued to the wooden object.

"Don't look so worried, Dustin wouldn't hurt a fly" a voice startles El back to reality.

Pitch has come to sit beside her, as she glances down to the large black beast, who is cocking an eyebrow at her.

El notices that she's been fiddling with her jacket sleeve, and she immediately drops her hand from worrying a spot there.

She huffed slightly, "I'm not worried," she tries and fails to hide the anxiety behind her words, looking away from the Anima.

Pitch scoffs loudly, "Like I said, you two are quite an interesting pair".

El looks back down at the wolf who has a smirk waiting on his face that's just for her.

She knows her cheeks flame at his words, and she opens her mouth to retaliate, but Veda beat her to it, "Why must you always sound so condescending, like you know it all?" she quips.

Pitch chuckles lowly, "Because, it seems to me that humans tend to not follow their own instincts, Mike is the worst for sure".

"You don't seem to be anything like Mike" the words tumble from El's mouth before she can catch them. She quickly raises a hand to her lips, her eyes widening in surprise at her own words.

Sure, she can feel a wonderful energy emitting from Pitch, one that slightly intoxicates her, just like when she's with Mike. But, there's something behind the Anima that she can't fully put her finger on.

She expects the wolf to snap at her, to berate her that she's wrong.

But instead, the wolf throws back his large head, his dark hair scattering about, letting out a long laugh.

El's surprised by his reaction as the wolf chuckles along for a bit, calming down just enough to take in a deep breath before speaking, "You definitely have that right, Mike and I are quite different from one another".

Again, El's eyes widen at the wolf's words.

"How can that be, though? You're the reflection of Mike's soul" Veda steps forward slightly.

Pitch merely shrugs, "It happens sometimes" his words are soft, as he pushes himself to stand on his four legs.

His mighty tail swishes back and forth behind him, he turns to El and gives her a wide smile.

"Just because we Anima's are the reflection of our human's soul, it doesn't mean we can't be different from our humans".

Pitch eyes both El and Veda carefully, "Most of the time, almost *all* the time, an Anima portrays many of the same characteristics its human does, but-" and at this he stops and takes in a deep breath, "Sometimes, an Anima is a deeper reflection. A reflection of what is actually going on inside their humans mind".

El listens carefully to the beast before her, "What's that supposed to mean about you and Mike?" she asks softly.

"It means-" Pitch croons slightly, "That Mike hasn't fully accepted who he is yet, he doesn't fully trust himself and he's afraid of who the *real* Mike is, so he doesn't let it show. Instead, I reflect it."

El isn't completely sure if she believes Pitch's words, she frowns at him. "But what? Would that mean Mike is more like you? Not the kind and caring man that he actually is?" the words are tight against El's throat.

At this, Pitch's grin widens, "But...isn't that the real question then?"

The Anima's words hit El harder than she would have liked, and she stands there, slightly off balance as if she was experiencing a bout of vertigo, because the weight of the words are more stunning than she would like to believe.

She's about to say something once again, however, Mike's bedroom door opens, and she's met with his tired expression. Dustin and his Anima trail behind.

Mike gives her a half smile as he approaches her, "Sorry about that, uh..." he stops short, as his eyes flicker from side to side as if he's not sure what to say.

But, El knows that he's trying to keep things together, so she reaches forward and places a gentle hand on his arm, giving it a light squeeze. "It's okay Mike, I get it".

She watches as Mike relaxes slightly, nodding his head in return, "Good, good, uh...would you mind, uhm...you and I having a quick talk as well?" he gives her a questioning look as he points towards the spare bedroom.

El nods quickly, and Mike takes her hand in his and pulls her along gently.

She feels her heart swoop greatly in her chest as if she's just gone down a steep dive on a rollercoaster. She can't help but tighten her grip in his.

Once they are behind the closed door of the spare bedroom, Mike turns to look at her and heaves out a heavy breath.

He then buries his head into his hands.

"Ugh, I'm so sorry about Dustin, he can be a handful" he jokes, his words somewhat muffled by his hands.

El giggles as she moves to lean against the bed, "It's no problem, he seems to be a nice guy".

Mike pulls his hands away and decides to tuck them into his pants pockets shrugging heavily with a crooked smile, "Oh yeah, Dustin is

one of the friendliest people you'll ever meet, but he can be a bit of a goofball, and a bit of an annoyance as well".

El hums in understanding as she waits for Mike to speak. He shuffles uncomfortably on his feet, and she can see his uncertainty.

"Mike, is everything okay?" she quips when he doesn't say anything for awhile.

He gives her a look, his head nodding slowly, "Yeah, yeah, sorry, I'm just...processing, is all" he states.

El nods slowly, "Yes, it seems to have been a handful of days of processing for us" she jokes and Mike grins at this.

"Yeah, exactly" he says as he slowly approaches her and tentatively takes a seat next to her on the bed.

She turns to face him expectedly, waiting for him to talk.

Finally, he sighs, and turns to her, their eyes searching each other's faces.

"Look" he says finally, "I didn't tell Dustin anything, I didn't know what was okay to say and what wasn't."

El feels the knot in her chest loosen. Even though she *knew* Mike wouldn't say anything, to hear him say it aloud made her relax. She didn't expect any less from her, and it made her heart sing.

"Thank you" she says finally, truthfully.

Mike gives her another half smile, "Well, I mean we never really discussed next steps and what not" he shrugs.

El nods slowly, "No, we didn't get that far," she laughs lightly.

"No uh...we kind of got interrupted" and she hears Mike's voice get soft and low, and she can feel the difference in the air between them.

She can't help but scoot slightly closer to him, their eyes meeting each other. Smiles growing across each of their faces.

"Is Dustin famous for that?" she teases, and Mike laughs at this shaking his head, "Oh yeah, that's Dustin for sure".

They both give small laughs in return, but then a semi-serious look crosses Mike's face. El watches as he seems to contemplate his next words in his head.

"So...what do we tell him?" he gives her an uncertain look, and she shrugs normally.

"I..I don't know I mean..." but words fail her, what should they say? It wasn't everyday that you came across someone who was on the run from some lab that used you as some weapon.

"My friends know about my powers, they wouldn't think any less of yours" Mike's words bring El back to their current predicament.

'*Right*', she reminded herself. Mike's friend's were all there when he discovered his powers, so why should her powers be any different?

But, then her heart falls slightly, sure, telling Mike was easy, but that was *very* different. They had a connection, and it wasn't just with their powers, it was something greater that she was still trying to figure out.

"You can trust them...I promise", it was as if Mike could read her mind, she looks at him steadily.

He's eyeing her cautiously. "I know...I know it can be scary, but my friends wouldn't do anything to put you in harms way" his voice is genuine and true, "And you don't have to tell them you're whole backstory either, you can just give them the basics" he shrugs.

El ponders his words for a bit, evaluating her options, but then Mike's words fall into place a bit more concretely, "Wait *friends*, as in not just Dustin?" she's a bit confused now.

A sheepish expression arises onto Mike's face as his leg begins to bounce nervously, "Yeah, about that, I guess the rest of the party is coming over as well".

"Party?" she questions, her anxiety beginning to bubble within her at

the thought of a million people coming into Mike's small apartment. Her breath quickens.

Mike holds up his hands quickly, obviously seeing the fear written on her face, "Oh, no, no, not a party, *party*. It's what my group of friends call our group, we were kind of nerds in school" he says as a flush covers his cheeks at his admission.

El narrows her eyes slightly at him and Mike chuckles, "I mean it, there's only three others who would be over. Will, Lucas and his girlfriend, Max" he explains.

"Trust me, my friend group doesn't get much larger than that" he scoffs at himself.

"And" he hesitates slightly, "I think they can help too."

She nods at his words as she takes everything in. She's about to meet Mike's other friends, people who have been in his life since they were children.

El had never had that in her life. Sure, Kali was there, but she was more like a sister than a friend. El's not exactly sure if she could even call the people in gang she was in family or even friends. A different sadness envelops her.

"Hey" Mike's gentle voice brought her back slightly, she doesn't meet his gaze, but she can feel his soft hand that has reached out to rest gently across hers that sits on her lap.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to. This is all your choice. I mean, we can totally come up with a different explanation as to why you're in my apartment" his voice teases, and El turns her head to look at him.

She can see that he's desperately trying to make her feel more comfortable with the whole situation. For, it seemed as if life just wanted to test El to make sure she was always aware of the dangers in the world. She never really caught a break.

But, she could see it written clearly on his face: he wanted to help her, in as many ways as he could. It was an expression she had never

experienced before, and he had said his friends might be able to help too, a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"We can tell them" her voice above a whisper.

Mike's shoulders relax greatly as he lets out a quick breath, "Yeah, okay, whatever you want to do, but...I think it's a great idea, they'll really like you" he says earnestly.

El simply nods at this, and then she watches as Mike's face switches once again, this time, a different type of uncertainty written there.

He squeezes her hand, "Uh, El?" he asks, lifting his head, their gaze meeting.

"Yeah?" she asks gently, moving just a hair closer, but the air shifting between them once again.

Mike takes in a deep breath before he speaks, "Uhm...earlier, uh before Dustin interrupted, I-" and he stops, shaking his head slightly before an uncertain laugh leaves his throat. His eyes flicker about, having trouble focusing with hers.

She can't help but allow the smile that begins to pull at her lips grace her features as she watches Mike fumble adorably with his words as his light skin on his cheeks begin to pinken, allowing his freckles to stand out even more.

She knows what he's trying to say, to explain. And she feels just as flustered as he does.

They both know that whatever is happening between them is exciting, it's new, at least to El. But, there's a side of fear and uncertainty as well. They had only met two days ago, whatever was growing between them wasn't normal...right?

And she can feel the hesitancy pulsing from Mike because he's just as confused as she is.

Yet, there's something deep within herself that tells her that all of this is normal. At least it's meant to be with Mike.

So, as she watches Mike falter lightly, she allows herself to bend forward slightly, and she can see Mike is doing the same.

"I know" is all she whispers as she squeezes Mike's hand in hers and they begin to come together once again, and it's like the moment they had about a half an hour ago, an indescribable pull that causes El's insides to squirm deliciously.

She can feel Mike's warm breath on her cheeks once again, as they get closer, closer...

"Yo, Mike!" Dustin's loud and erratic voice cuts through the moment like a samurai blade cutting through a stalk of bamboo.

She and Mike jump apart so quickly that they lightly bump heads.

"Ah!" they both cry as they reach up to touch the tender imprint of where each other's foreheads bumped roughly.

Mike lets out an exasperated sigh, as he stands quickly to his feet and wrenches open the spare bedrooms door.

"What!" he seethes through clenched teeth as El watches, slightly amused at Mike's annoyed state.

"Lucas just texted that they're on their way up, just wanted you to know!" he says almost too happily and Mike huffs in return, turning quickly to look at El.

She gives him a sheepish grin, as she knows her face is flushed yet again from the moment that *almost* occurred between them. He lets out an angry breath shaking his head.

"Dustin, moment ruiner since 1985" he jokes, and El lets out a genuine laugh as she removes her hand from her head.

Mike approaches her as she stands from the bed. Their eyes meet gently, "Sorry about that, about *him*" Mike throws a thumb over his shoulder at the now open door where she knows Dustin is.

El only shrugs, "It's fine Mike, besides, we got to discuss what we needed to" she winces slightly, knowing that she's now avoiding what

had almost happened between them...again.

Mike's nods slowly, "Yeah" his voice is low, sad.

Panic races through El's veins at Mike's changed demeanor. No, she didn't want to avoid what was growing between them, but she wasn't sure if they were going to actually *talk* about it or...her mind blanks, and she reaches a quick hand out to take his in hers.

Mike's dark eyes meet her light ones instantly, "We can continue later...right?" her voice is just a whisper, but she needed him to know that she was hopefully on the same page as him. She also realizes her words are a bit *forward*, but she also doesn't care.

She smiles broadly as Mike brightens at her words, cheeks all flush once again as he nods at her, "Yeah, we can definitely talk later".

And with that he turns towards the bedroom door as he pulls her along with him out into the living room. El's heart pounding all the way for more reasons than one.

Okay, I'm ending it right there for now. I know this is a bit shorter chapter but I really wanted to get something out. And I know, I interrupted another kiss moment, hehehe. They will get there soon though :)

Anyways, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it's not one of my favorites, but I've got A LOT going on right now in my personal life, so feeling like writing and having time to do so has been limited.

My grandmother whom I'm super close to has been diagnosed with stage four lung cancer and is quickly declining. So, I've been spending as much extra time with her as possible, and my gumption to write is very low. So, please be patient as I start writing the next chapters, as they make take longer than normal to get out, but I will continue to write as I can.

Thank you all for understanding, not looking for anything, I just know there's many wonderful readers out there who look forward to updates, as I do with stories that I follow, so I'd

rather have everyone understand why updates might be not as frequent.

And, as always, let me know what you think and please leave a REVIEW, I love them and appreciate everyone that comes my way :)

7. Meeting The Party

A huge thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter and for the nice thoughts on my grandmother. Taking it one day at a time right now. So, I'm puttering away at this chapter and if I get it out sooner rather than later, then great :)

Also, I was going back through the last chapter and realized I accidentally called Max, Lucas' girlfriend, she's supposed to be his fiancée. So, slight screw up on my part. Sometimes my brain goes to the show itself and or I get writing too fast and don't go back and check.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything.

June 16th, 1993

Annoyance is still prickling in the back of his mind as he gently guides El back out into the main living area. He honestly can't believe that Dustin interrupted them *again!*

He seethes slightly in his own head. But, truthfully, he's not exactly sure why he's so perturbed.

Mike had literally spent *years*, basically his whole life avoiding any type of relationship with a girl because of his weird deep notion that he should wait, he needed to be patient and save everything for his soulmate.

Of course, his friends had teased him mercilessly throughout the years. Each of them reminding him of different factors.

Like, '*Dude, what if she's kissed or slept with someone?*', or, '*You really want to be that inexperienced when you meet your soulmate?*'. It was those stupid comments or remarks that continued to push Mike into believing deep down in his gut that he would maybe never find his soulmate. But then, there was always this nagging feeling even deeper, that felt even truer to him that told him it was okay to wait, that it was actually the right thing to do.

So, he followed that deep instinct and kept it intact.

Truthfully he believed his silly notion and belief in waiting to find his soulmate before he began any relationship came from watching his parents interact with one another.

No, not everyone found their soulmates, and never would. So many settled with the next best thing, and he knew that's what his parents had done. Sure they got along for the most part, however, as he and his siblings grew, he saw the tension increase and the lack of affection and love that was scantily seen between the two of them fade. It was almost as if they were merely existing with one another, comfortable in where they were in life.

As most do when they settle with their partner, Mike believed that they all had some kind of hope that their Anima would miraculously change one day. That the fear of not being with their soulmate was something they could just push to the back of their mind.

And it was exactly this thought that scared Mike the most: he didn't want to just settle.

Sure, there had been plenty of girls that caught his eye and interest throughout the years, but none of them sparked him the way he knew he would feel with his soulmate.

And now, a random girl literally came barrelling into his life and he's beginning to feel things he never has before, and it scares him.

No one knows how the whole soulmate thing is supposed to work. Like for Max and Lucas, they were friends for years, even dated for awhile before their Anima's had finally changed. It was all so peculiar to Mike.

But now, here was El, an amazing and beautiful woman who just happened to come into his life. Not just that, but they were similar in so many ways. He couldn't deny the initial attraction that he felt for her, but the raw feelings imbedded deeply into the way they looked at each other, the quick spark of electricity that was present each time they touched, it was so different, and it terrified Mike to no end.

They had almost kissed, *twice!* His brain reminds him. Two days ago, they were just beings existing in the world, not knowing that each other existed. Now here he was allowing her to stay in his home, connecting with her, and willing to throw out any of his silly notions of soulmates just to get to know El even more so.

Sure, he knew deep down that El *could* be his soulmate, but he also struggled with accepting the fact with how they met, so spontaneously. *'But isn't that how it's supposed to work?'* the thought transverses his mind with ease.

But, before he can continue to argue with himself over the matter, a loud barking brings him back to reality.

"Dart, chill, I'm getting you some bacon" Dustin shakes his head at his Anima who is all but dancing on his four paws as Dustin had discovered his and El's remains of this morning's breakfast.

Mike rolls his eyes as he and El stand on the other side of his kitchen island watching Dustin pick at a cold piece of bacon and waving it in front of Dart, who barks once again.

"Stop teasing!" the shaggy haired Anima grows impatient when Dustin laughs and finally tosses him a piece, in which Dart snatches out of the air at lightning speed.

"Hmm, good bacon" Dart licks his chops nodding to Mike. El giggles beside him.

"You could have asked before helping yourself" Mike teased his curly haired friend who merely shrugs.

"Figured you guys were done with it, I mean it is cold" he says as he thoughtfully chews his own piece of bacon, but then raises his gaze to look between Mike and El, a playful grin spreading on his lips. Mike braces himself for Dustin's next words, knowing that it will be a remark towards him having a girl in his apartment.

"Why is it so cold anyways? Were you two too busy making out or something?" Dustin's smile grows even wider.

Mike's pretty sure he should spontaneously combust right now with

how red his cheeks must be. His mouth drops open, and he can't help but turn to look at El, who is trying to hide her blossoming red face behind her hands, as she casually glances at Mike from the corner of her eyes.

Mike lets out a haughty sigh, "Dustin" he growls slowly, menacingly, but it only causes Dustin to point at the pair of them and laugh, "Oh my god, you totally were, weren't you!?" he bends over, placing his hands on his knees as his laughter continues.

He looks over at El again and sees that she is giving him an interesting look. One that almost says '*Is this really your friend?*', as her face continues to flush.

He *wants* to say something to defend himself, but he doesn't want to reveal anything just yet. So, Mike finds himself with his mouth open, his jaw opening and closing, small noises coming out as he tries to defend himself and El.

But, thankfully a knocking is heard on the other side of his front door, a rush of relief washes over Mike as Dustin stops laughing, composing himself.

"I'll...just get that" Mike mutters as he moves from his spot and makes his way towards his apartment door.

Taking in a deep breath, knowing that opening the door and letting his friends in is about to open up a whole new can of worms, especially when they see El.

So, with a sweaty hand, Mike turns his door knob and pulls his door open.

He greets his friends with a warm smile, "Hey guys! Come on in!"

She had been mentally preparing herself for the last ten minutes trying to come to terms with the fact that in just a couple moments she was going to be meeting all of Mike's childhood friends. She was *not* expecting this arriving at his apartment a couple days ago.

But it seemed as if fate had other ideas.

El was barely coming to terms with the fact that something was growing rapidly between herself and Mike, and now she was pretty much getting thrown into his entire life. Not just that, but she was also worrying about Kali and the others in the back of her mind. All of it frightened her.

When Mike had announced that his friends would all be coming over, it was a big pill for her to swallow so quickly. But, the way Mike had reassured her that she didn't have to say anything to his friends calmed her nerves. From the way Mike described them, they seemed like good people.

'They could help too', Mike's words rang in her mind over and over again like ringing church bells. And it was the one thing she was grasping onto as she felt her breath increase in her chest as she walked out into the kitchen to meet Dustin.

She quickly realized that this man enjoyed teasing Mike relentlessly. She couldn't even fathom a time she had blushed so intensely in her life in the short time meeting the man.

His short jabs at hers and Mike's relationship were unexpected to her. However, it seemed that Mike had expected them the moment he walked through the door.

She could see after Dustin's comment about them making out, that, Mike seemed somewhat peeved at his words, but out of the corner of her eye as she watched him, she could see him looking at her in interest. Almost seeing what her reaction would be to Dustin's words.

They had almost kissed, twice, and to say she wasn't attracted to Mike would be an all out lie. But it wasn't just his crazy dark hair, or the way his freckles dotted his face perfectly, it was the deep caring heart that was delicately laid out on his sleeve for all to see.

She had never met a man who was so thoughtful and understanding as Mike, and she's pretty sure that, combined with his good looks is what was causing her to feel so overwhelmed by her new feelings.

So, she had given him an earnest look, trying to convey that what Dustin was saying was okay, that she wasn't bothered by them.

Although, his laughing and teasing couldn't help her very red face.

It was almost a relief to dissipate the awkward tension that was now hanging between the two of them when there was a knock on Mike's door.

Now, El's attention was on the fact that she was about to meet three new people, and she wasn't sure if she was ready for all of this.

With wide eyes, El followed Mike's steady movements as he made his way to the door. She watched him take a deep breath and open the door, a smile appearing on his face as he gestured and welcomed his friends inside.

Three new people walked in through the door, accompanied by their Anima. They had yet to look into the kitchen just yet, so it allowed El a second to gauge Mike's friends.

The first person her eyes were drawn to was the redheaded woman. Her long cascading locks captured her face and looks in such a way, El felt a pang of slight jealousy. Her hair danced down to her mid back, and her stunning blue eyes made her light up the room. And El could tell by the way she held herself tall and strong that she was *not* someone to mess with.

The next person was a dark skinned man who placed a delicate hand on the redheaded woman's back, as he guided her into Mike's apartment. His calm and cool demeanor seemed to be the exact opposite of the woman beside him.

Then finally, the last man, who was a bit shorter than Mike and his other male friends, greeted Mike with a quick hug. She could see that he had a warmth of kindness that emanated from him. His features still seemed a bit young compared to his friends, but the smile that spread across his face showed years of experience.

Mike was talking to the three as he lead them to the kitchen, and it only took a millisecond for each of them to halt all conversation and stare at her.

El froze in her seat, unsure as to what to do, never being in a

situation like this before. Should she stand and greet them? Say 'hello'? Her mind reeled with a million possibilities, but it seemed the decision was made for her when she watched the redheaded woman smile brightly as she approached her.

"Wow, Dustin wasn't lying, you did have a girl in your apartment," her voice is cool, but reeming with tease as she casts a look to Mike whose face is red once again.

His head flicks quickly to Dustin, "Dude, you told them!?" he raises his arms in shock.

Dustin shrugs his shoulders, "I couldn't believe it, figured it'd be easier to let them know before they came to the apartment".

Mike stifles a groan, as he closes his eyes tightly.

But, the woman erases the space between El and herself.

She stuck out her hand, "I'm Max, it's nice to meet you".

El can tell that the woman is being genuine in her greeting. The way her smile pulls meets her eyes, even if there is curiosity dancing behind them. So, El takes in a deep breath, a smile forming on her face as she reaches out her own hand, shaking Max's.

"It's nice to meet you" El says lightly, and the woman's smile widens.

"Wow, Mike, never knew you'd pick out such a beauty" Max teases turning back to look at Mike. El ducks her head shyly at the woman's words.

El's pretty sure that Mike would love to fade out of existence right now, as he groans again, but his other two male friends approach her as well.

"I'm Lucas" the dark skinned man holds out his hand stepping next to Max, and El reaches to shake his hand as well.

El watches as Max turns into the man's embrace, "Yeah, this stalker is my soon to be husband," she wiggles her eyebrows to the man, who scoffs slightly, but the smile never leaves his face, especially when

Max stands on her tiptoes to plant a light kiss on his cheek.

She feels her heart swoon at the two interactions. And she's even more surprised to see there two Anima's who have jumped up onto the counter.

"Oh!" El can't help but jump slightly noticing that the two beings are exactly the same. Both humans reach out to touch them.

"Don't forget us" the smaller of the two says gently, as she presses into Max's hand.

Max sighs rolling her eyes, "We won't" she says as she holds out her arm for her red panda Anima to climb onto her shoulders.

Max pats her companion lightly, "This is Zelda, named after one of my favorite video game franchises" her Anima rubs her face against hers.

Lucas stands near his Anima, "And this is Nam" he pats his larger Anima.

El's smile widens as she takes in the Anima's and their humans.

"You're soulmates" her voice is soft, a breath of air hanging from her words.

Both Max and Lucas nod, "Yeah, we were kind of surprised too" he shrugs.

"I've...I've never really met a couple who found their soulmates" El states in awe.

Max shrugs, "You rarely do, I mean, Lucas and I dated for awhile and one day, well-" she gestures between the two Anima's.

El is still in amazement and meeting an actual couple who had found their soulmates. It was a deep desire within her to find her own. She had never dated anyone, let alone she had never experienced her first kiss even. Her heart soared in seeing two beings who had actually found the other half of their soul.

She couldn't help but peek a glance at Mike, and she was surprised to see his expression as the two stood by one another.

Was it longing? She watched as his shoulders sagged almost in defeat, and a wistful look crossed his face. El's heart sank in her chest as his expression, she wanted to reach out, to gently reassure him, but she was pulled from her thoughts when Mike's last friend moved in beside Max and Lucas.

"Guess I'm last, the name's Will and this is Elvie" Will then stuck out his hand in greeting which El returned with a smile. She then glanced over Will's shoulder to see a small koala clinging to Will's back, she 'awed' out loud at the adorable creature.

Will chuckled at this, "Sorry he's not awake, he tends to sleep most of the time" he rolls his eyes.

El giggles slightly, and she then feels a movement by her feet. She looks down to see her own Anima rubbing up against her legs, the fox's amber eyes look up to her as to say, 'Don't forget me'.

El gestures down to her fox, Lucas, Max and Will's eyes follow, "And this is my Anima, Veda" she says.

"It's nice to meet all of you" Veda bows her head slightly in introduction.

Max bends to look at her Anima, "Wow, she's beautiful El" she says standing to her feet, and El can't help but see the coy look she flashes to Mike as she says her next words, "Just like you El, right Mike?"

And El has to hold back her laughter slightly as Mike gives the woman an expression that is mixed between annoyance and disbelief.

Mike then turns quickly to look at her, and he begins opening and closing his mouth like a fish gasping for breath.

"I uhm...of course...I mean, yes...yes El is pretty, *beautiful*, even, but I uh..." his words are quick and fumbling and now El can't help but giggle lightly, her face flushed at his words.

He shuffles uncertainty on his long legs, his eyes never leaving hers.

She gives him a soft, knowing expression, hoping she's relaying the right meaning. And it seems she does, because his shoulders finally relaxed and he gives her his dopey, half smile and she all but melts right there.

She moves her eyes just slightly, and they are immediately caught by Max's deep blue ones, she's giving her a knowing grin as she flicks her eyes between El and Mike. El ducks her head from further embarrassment.

"So, *El*-" Max teases lightly as she leans against Mike's kitchen island, "What brings you to our lanky friends place anyways?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of curious about that too, I thought we were coming over here to help you and Dustin with that toy or something?" Will turns to Mike with a questioning look. "It's not like you to have a girl over".

Mike glares at Will's comment.

There's a pregnant silence that falls before them, El looks up and moves her head from each of Mike's friends to the next, unsure as to what to say.

"Were you on a date or something?" Lucas breaks the silence as he leans one of his elbows next to Max on the island.

"Uh...no, no...it's nothing like that!" Mike's voice is a bit higher than normal, and there's a slight pang of sadness that rings in El's chest as she looks up towards Mike.

He finds her eyes, as his widen in shock at his own words, "Uh, not that I *wouldn't* want to go on a date with El, I just mean...uhm" and the words die on his tongue and then he just huffs, burying his hands into his face, "You guys are just trying to make me die of embarrassment, aren't you?"

His friends laughter rings out in Mike's small kitchen. And the noise is something El has never really experienced. She marvels at the unfamiliar noise, the warm feeling that surrounds the group of friends, it's all surreal.

"Mike, you've got to learn to take a joke every once in awhile," Lucas pats Mike roughly, causing Mike to let out a breath of air.

"Well, you guys need to learn to not make fun of me every five seconds!" Mike bites back, but it only causes more laughter from the others.

"You do realize that it is a bit odd for you to have a woman in your apartment right?" Dustin states plainly, gesturing to El.

She can't help but frown. "I am right here ya know" she lifts one of her eyebrows to the curly haired man who merely shrugs.

"You've got to know that Mike here has sworn off of girls until he finds *the one*", Dustin uses air quotations on the last two words, all while popping another piece of cold bacon into his mouth.

This...this is something she did not know about her rescuer. She turns to the man in question and he gives her a forlorn look.

To El, Mike is a man of any girls dreams, or at least her own, she believes.

Sure, he might be kind of nerdy, and a bit on the taller side. But, the adorable freckles that dot his face perfectly, along with his dark sweeping hair, and his intense eyes, El can't help but be enamored by this man. And it wasn't even just his looks alone that El marveled at, for his kind and tender heart and the way he was always looking out for her caused her to swoon unsteady on her feet.

But, Dustin's sudden proclamation at what appeared to be a secret of Mike's caught her interest. *'He has never been with anyone'*, her heart and mind sing happily. She can't help the giddiness that grows within her. For, it's another factor they have in common with one another.

"You know Dustin, you don't have to go around proclaiming my life to the world" Mike grumbles to his friend, who merely shrugged in return.

It doesn't take El long to notice that the attention is all on her once again. Her eyes have moved about the room and she catches the quick glances Mike's friends are giving her as they try to not focus

their gazes directly on her. They fail miserably however.

It's then that El realizes that they are getting nowhere, fast. That this night is just going to drag on with endless teases and remarks thrown at herself and Mike until his friends understand the exact reason as to why she is in Mike's apartment.

So, taking a deep breath El straightens her back and clears her throat a bit louder than usual. It doesn't surprise her when the room falls silent, and now everyone's eyes *are* focused directly on her.

She takes a last casual glance at Mike who gives her a curious look, but she just nods slowly, his eyes widen in realization.

"Uhm, so I know you are all wondering why in the world I'm in Mike's apartment" she tries to keep her voice light and somewhat teasing.

Mike's friends all nod eagerly.

El sighs, "Well, I'd be happy to tell you all how we met, and what's going on, but..." and here she hesitates, her confident demeanor dropping quickly as she glances down at her hands in her lap that are once again playing with the hemline of her shirt.

She swallows before continuing, not looking up just yet, "But...I need to trust all of you with what I'm going to share".

The room is silent for a bit, and El risks the chance of peeking up slightly. The friends are all exchanging looks with one another, and their solemn expressions worry her slightly.

But then, smiles break on each of their faces.

Will's the one to speak for them all, "Of course El, any friend of Mike is a friend of ours. You trust him, which means you can trust us as well".

El lets out a sigh of relief, a gentle smile pulling on her own face as she nods and whispers a small "Thanks" to the group.

Mike moves slowly towards her, a look of acknowledgement painted

on his face. He places a gentle hand on her back. "Why don't we move to the living room, it's quite the story" he then nods towards his living room.

The friends then all begin to shuffle out of Mike's small kitchen as they putter into the living room. El goes to stand from the stool she had been occupying, but Mike's gentle grip on her forearm stops her.

She turns to look up at him, she still can't get over his height. He bends down to whisper to her, "You sure you're okay with this?" his voice is full of anticipation.

El takes in a steadying breath, and looks to meet his rich eyes. She can see the uncertainty dancing within them, but, from what he's said, she knows she can trust him, and his friends.

She moves her head slowly up and down, "Yeah, I'm sure, I know I just met them a handful of minutes ago, but...I think I'm okay with trusting them if you are".

Mike's face lights up at this, "You definitely can, trust me, if they can keep my secret for all these years, they'll keep yours".

El marvels at Mike's genuineness, and she gifts him a soft smile. She's suddenly surprised when his hand moves down her arm and grips her hand, he gives it a tight squeeze, a reassurance.

"Ready?" he asks.

El nods determinedly, "Ready", and Mike guides them over to the living, hand in hand, as they sit on his remaining love seat together.

Mike's pretty sure he can hear his heart pounding in the cusp of his ear, it's the only steady sound that he can focus on in this moment. Currently he's holding onto El's hand as he once again guides her into his living room.

He's not exactly sure *why* his heart is beating wildly, but he can only imagine it's either because El's about to tell her entire story to his oldest friends, or that El has wrapped her hand within his, and it's dangerously intoxicating to him.

They both sit cozily next to one another and as they sit, their hands break apart slowly. There's a slight twinge in Mike's heart as El's hand leaves his, but he also knows that if they continue to hold them, his friends are only going to start up again.

Everyone settles. Lucas, Max and Will sit on Mike's larger couch, while Dustin sits on the floor, one legged kicked out, relaxed.

Their attention is all on them, and Mike turns a bit to face El. He sees her face blanch as she takes in the eyes that are now on her.

He can see she doesn't know where to start.

And before he can give her some encouragement, Dustin speaks, "So, how did you guys meet?" he gestures between the two of them.

This seems to relax El slightly as she gives a light laugh, she turns to look at him, and his heart race quickes when he sees her gaze, it's light and teasing, "Well", she says a smirk dancing across her face, "We *literally* ran into one another".

Mike watches as his friends faces crinkle into confusion.

"Wait you mean-" Will starts, and Mike jumps in, "Yeah, we or I should say *El*" and at this he can't help but give the girl beside him a playful nudge, "Nearly took me out the other night".

At this Max laughs, "Wow, I guess it doesn't take much to knock you down string bean".

Mike glares at this, but El giggles, "Well, you can say it was an accident, I actually collided with Pitch, which caused a slew of events to happen".

"*Collided!?*" Everyone's heads now flick over to Pitch who sits by the other Anima's. He stands and shakes his burly head, laughing lightly, "She practically catapulted over me, and kneed me right in the gut".

"Pitch" Mike throws his Anima a look, which is returned with an eye roll.

"No, he's right, I totally took him out" El shrugs beside him.

Mike turns to see that El is giving him a look that reads, '*don't worry about it*'. Mike softens.

"And, why were you running anyways?" this time Lucas' voice breaks through.

At this, El stiffens as she tucks her lips inwards, contemplating her next words.

She shifts uneasily in her seat, his friends wait patiently for her to continue. Eventually, she raises her head.

"I was running from...bad men" her voice is barely above a whisper.

Mike watches as Max shakes her head a bit and leans forward, "Wait...did you just say, *bad men*?"

El lifts her gaze to meet Max, and she nods slowly, "Yes, bad men" she repeats, a silence falls on them.

"Okay, you can't just leave us hanging like that" Lucas stutters.

Mike throws him a look, but it goes ignored.

El huffs, "It's...complicated, my group and I were being attacked by a group of men who have been searching for my sister and I for years".

"Where did you live?" Will asks.

"In an abandoned warehouse, my sister, Kali, and I lived there with a couple other people".

"Woah, wait you were...homeless?" Dustin winces slightly at his last word.

El shakes her head, "No...I mean, not *technically*, I mean, it was a roof over our heads. We had a place to sleep, food, clothes, we just didn't live like everyone else".

There's a pause.

"So, what's that supposed to mean?" Max shakes her head, her eyes

narrowing at El slightly.

Mike can't help but shift in his seat, trying to move closer to El without drawing much attention.

"It means...we stole, we robbed, we...we did what was necessary to survive" El's voice is tight.

"How did you never get caught if you've been doing it for years?" Dustin chimes in.

This is where a half smile pulls on El's lips, "And that's exactly the reason why my sister and I have been trying to be tracked down by the bad men."

"What's so special about you guys?" Lucas questions leaning back in his seat.

This is where El finally flicks her eyes over to Mike's, their eyes meet, and he knows this is going to change a lot of things, so he decides to step in.

"You see, after El fell, she got hurt", Mike starts not taking his eyes off of El, "She couldn't run, so I had to help her".

"Wait, wait, wait, you're interrupting-" Dustin tries to cut in, but Mike overshadows him, turning towards his friends.

"We were only a couple of blocks away from my place, so I brought her here, where she was safe. Where I could-" and he stops short as his friends look at him in shock, knowing where he is going with this.

"Mike, don't tell me you-" Dustin then makes out some weird gestures, that Mike knows are supposed to signify him healing. Mike rolls his eyes, "Yes Dustin, there was nothing else I could do" he explained.

"Why not call an ambulance, go to the hospital?" Max questions.

"No hospitals, can't go there" El shakes her head.

Mike nods, "She was scared, I was scared, and...I don't know I just knew I could trust her" he shrugged as he watched El.

He lets out a quick puff of air, "And then, once I was done...she had this look like she couldn't believe what just happened".

"Well, no *duh*, we had that same reaction too!" Lucas states, "Is that why you kept her here? Because she threatened to spill your secret or-"

"No!" El's voice startled the group in Mike's living room. Mike turned quickly to look at the girl beside him who was glaring daggers at his oldest friend.

Lucas holds up his hands in defense, "Uh, woah, sorry, guess I-" but El cut him off, "I would *never* betray Mike like that, especially since...since he was like me," her voice teeters off.

At this, all eyes are on him, waiting for Mike to explain.

"Wait, *like Mike*, do you mean?" Will's gentle voice breaks through the silence.

It takes her a minute, but El finally nods, "Yes...I have powers...just like Mike".

The others gawk at her for a moment.

Dustin moves back even more so letting out a low whistling noise as he ruffles his curly hair.

"This is crazy! We never knew there would be others like Mike!" Lucas exclaims.

"Well, it was just because we had never actually *met* another person like Mike, it didn't mean they weren't out there" Will reasons.

"Yeah but, what are the chances that another person with powers literally runs into Mike, it's just weird" Dustin rationalizes.

Mike shrugs at this, "Either way, El is like me, and I promised that I would help her".

He casts another casual glance in her direction, and he can see a smile dancing across her lips. His heart swelled tremendously at the

sight.

"So, El, what are your powers?" Dustin eagerly sits forward once again, his eyes wide like a child on Christmas morning.

Mike can't help but keep his gaze on the girl beside him. Sure, she had told him about her powers, but she hadn't shown him yet, and to be honest, he was curious.

"It's, uhm...telekinesis" her voice is quiet.

"Woah, like Jean Grey?" Dustin asks even more excited, he's now leaning forward on his hands onto his knees.

El blinks slowly, not knowing Dustin's reference.

"Uh..." she stammers, and then glances at Mike, her eyes pleading for help.

Mike flashes her a quick smile before turning back to his friend, "She doesn't know who that is Dustin, she-" but before he can finish Dustin sits up on his knees quickly, "You don't know who Jean Grey is? What about the X-Men? I mean, you and Mike were practically born to be apart of their group!" he stresses.

El startles and moves back further into her seat, Mike jumps in, "Dustin, chill, there's a lot you don't understand".

Dustin furrows his eyebrows, "What do you mean by that?"

Mike flusters as he tries to catch his words, but El speaks before him, "I didn't have a normal upbringing, I was raised in a lab, with my sister Kali".

Once again, all eyes are on El, as everyone's mouths hang open in shock.

"A lab?" Will's voice is full of concern.

El nods, she then goes into detail about how her mom too had some kind of powers, in which she inherited. She explained how she was born in the lab and taken and raised to be used as a weapon, she had

no idea about the outside world until a handful of years ago. Mike notices she doesn't go into extreme details as she did with him in talking about the abuse she went through.

After El finishes her story, Mike looks over his friends who seem to be soaking in everything they've just heard.

"A weapon...raised in a lab? Who does that?" Dustin shakes his head wildly.

"Exactly, all they saw El and her sister as was to be used, that's why they escaped" Mike finished.

"But, how did they find you here? I mean, you and your sister had been gone for *years*" Max laments.

At this El shrugs and mutters, "I don't know".

Mike watches El as she ponders this thought in her own head. Almost asking how *did* her captor find them?

He reaches over and squeezes El hand, she looks to him and gives him a soft smile in return.

"Look, what matters now is that El is still being hunted down by these men, and they have her sister. She needs our help" Mike states plainly.

His friends look at each other, all of them able to silently communicate with one another after almost two decades of friendship.

Will's the first to turn to them, "Of course, we will do anything to help, I mean, that's what friends are for."

El perks up at this, "Friends?" her voice uncertain.

Mike's friends nod eagerly. "Of course, any friend of Mike, is a friend of ours" Max smiles to El.

"Yeah, I mean, who would have thought that we'd have *two* friends who have super powers!" Dustin exclaims excitedly.

Mike tries to step in, "Dustin, would you-" but he's cut off by the curly haired man who sits up quickly once again, "Wait, El, can we see your powers?" he asks curiously.

Again, Mike is intrigued by this notion, he turns his head quickly to look at the girl with whom he still holds her hand.

She nods slowly. Mike's not sure what she's doing, but a switch seems to turn on in her, as she closes her eyes and opens them with a steely fixation on his coffee table.

His eyes widen in amazement as it begins to float in the air effortlessly. Everyone gasps in surprise, as they all sit back as the table teeters in the air, but then does a quick spin, and then lands back down on his carpet as if it were made of a feather.

Mike's mouth is open in shock, his gaze falls on El who is already looking at him. A small trail of blood trickles from her nose. A smile pulls at his face, "That's...that's incredible" he half breathes, half laughs in shock.

El bashfully tries to not meet his eyes as she wipes away the blood that trickles from her nose. "It's not as amazing as yours though".

Mike guaffs at her words, "What do you mean!? You can use your powers all on your own, I have to have Pitch by my side in order to use mine".

"But you heal", her words are genuine as she looks at him straight into his eyes.

He's not exactly sure what the hidden meaning behind her words, but there's something there.

"Wow El!" Dustin shakes the two out of their little moment. "That was so cool!"

El flushes at his words. "Thanks. It's not much, I can do other things to" she shrugs as if it's not a big deal.

"What other things?" Will now asks, a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Uhm...I can go into this...void and find people, listen to them without them knowing I'm there" she explains.

"Like, a spy?" Dustin asks.

El ponders this a bit before answering, "I guess. I mean, that's what the men in the lab liked to use me for anyways".

Mike sees the frown forming on her face. He can tell that she's thinking about her time there, and his heart breaks for her.

"Well, whatever the reason, or whatever powers you do have, we promise we will help you get your sister back", Mike states a bit more boldly than he had intended to.

El lifts her head to look him in the eyes, "Really?"

Mike nods at her, "Definitely, it's like Will said, that's what friends are for...right?" he flashes her a brilliant smile.

He can't help but be enamored by the flush that decorates her face with his words, "Right" she whispers back, returning the smile.

A moment passes between them, and it's only the clearing of Max's throat do either of them break eye contact with one another.

Max is giving Mike a knowing look, "Alright, we get that there's some special connection between the two of you, but you don't have to do it in front of us," she teases.

Yeah, Mike's pretty sure his friends are trying to make him die of embarrassment as his face lights up once again. And to avoid any other pokes and prods at him and El, Mike stands quickly to his feet.

"Uh, it's starting to get late, why don't I order some pizza and we can discuss this further?" he looks at his friends who all nod eagerly.

"Pizza sounds great! I'm starving!" Dustin whines holding his stomach dramatically.

Lucas swats at Dustin's head as he moves to stand, "Don't be such a whine ass, you just had some bacon" he reminds him.

Dustin stands to his feet as he and Lucas continue to argue.

Mike rolls his eyes as he moves to the kitchen where his phone sits.

Just as he grabs it though, a hand on his shoulder startles him.

"Jesus, Max, you don't have to-" he starts to go off on the redhead, but she holds a hand up to his mouth to silence him.

"You've got it bad Wheeler" she says through a low voice.

Mike crinkles his face, "What are you talking about Mayfield?" he slumps his shoulders.

Max dramatically rolls her eyes, she pulls on Mike's shoulders, causing their heads to come together, faced away from their group of friends.

"I'm talking about El, numb nuts. You can't take your eyes off of her" she whispers harshly, and Mike pulls away from her grasp.

He shakes his head, "What are you talking about Max, I just met her a couple of days ago", is what he says, but then his traitorous inner voice takes over, *'Yeah, and you almost didn't kiss her, twice!'*

He pushes the thought away, focusing back onto Max.

She lets out an annoyed huff, "You're so hopeless and it's not even funny," she waves her hand dramatically in the air.

"I'm not hopeless" Mike deadpans, truly getting sick of his friends getting on his case about dating.

"You're definitely blind then. You're so concerned about this whole 'soulmate' thing, that it's letting you pass up on something, or I should say, *someone* that's right in front of you!" Max's voice begins to rise.

Mike's eyes flash over to his group of friends behind Max. Dustin and Lucas are still bickering quite loudly, and Will has moved to sit beside El, in his vacated seat. Will seems to be enthused about something, all while El seems to be ducking her head in bashfulness.

But, Max's sudden rise in voice didn't seem to be noticed.

"Will you keep your voice down!" Mike whispers harshly.

"Will you actually go out with someone who's interested in you?" Max bites back.

"Max. El has been through a lot in the last few days, hell, her whole life has been a nightmare! I'm not going to be asking her out anytime soon," he growls at Max as he turns to his phone, trying to signal to the redhead that he's done with the conversation.

But, a gasp comes from Max that distracts him. Mike throws his arms down to his side and glares at the girl, "What is it!?" he all but bellows to her.

There's a knowing smile creeping onto her face, and Max is all but dancing on her feet, "So, does that mean you *will* ask her out, after we find her sister or whatever?"

Mike blanches, as he just realizes his poor choice of words, he holds up his hands waving them before her, "Oh, no, no, no, that's *not* what I meant".

But Max has him as she points an accusatory finger in his direction, "Oh, but you totally did, you like her, *a lot!*" she drawls.

Mike's just about had it, and his mouth begins to run before his brain can comprehend what he's even saying, "Look, just because El's pretty, and sweet and kind in many different ways, doesn't mean I like her! And it doesn't matter that just because I'm helping her out of her shitty situation, doesn't mean she likes me!" Mike growls low to the girl.

Max doesn't back down though, "I can't believe you can't see the way she looks at you though, she's like a love sick puppy".

Mike rolls his eyes, "Yeah, maybe because I'm one of the few human beings in this world who has treated her with respect".

"That doesn't mean anything, it's the way she looks at you a-" but Mike cuts her off, his anger getting the better of him, "Look, just drop

it okay, it's none of your business with whatever does happen between us".

"So there *will* be something?" Max continues to tease.

"Just because we almost-!" Mike's voice raises an octave and he quickly glances once again to his friends, this time, Will has seemed to notice, but not the others, Mike huffs and turns his attention back to his phone.

"Almost...what?" Max asks eagerly, coming closer to him.

"Nothing, it's nothing" he shakes his head as he begins to type in the local pizza shop's number, desperately trying to avoid Max's gaze.

When he raises the phone up to his ear, it begins to ring and Max is still giving him an 'I don't believe you gaze'. But, she finally sighed in defeat, but not before pointing a finger into his face, "Alright Wheeler, you win this time, but mark my words, I won't let you screw this up," and with that, she finally leaves him with one last look.

Mike sighs to himself as he watches Max rejoin their group of friends. His eyes can't help but move upwards, his sight landing on El, and he sees that she's already looking at him. She gives him a gentle look and a soft smile, a weird pang in his chest almost causes him to choke when their eyes meet.

He gives her a dopey smile in return and she flashes her teeth at him, her cheeks tinged red.

Mike could have stayed like that forever if there wasn't an incessant voice in his ear yelling, "Hello, helloooo, is anyone there?"

His attention is finally brought back to his task at hand, "Uh yeah, hi, I'd like to order some pizzas" Mike stutters as he half places an order and half looks at El who is smiling and laughing with his friends. It's one of the most beautiful sights he's ever seen.

And it suddenly hits him: Max is right, and he's a total goner.

Well, I got that chapter done sooner than I was expecting. It's been slow at my job so I've had some down time and have been

able to add to this here and there. Thankfully my Nan is doing pretty good right now, which is always a bright light.

Anyways, what do you guys think? I really liked writing the end part with Max and Mike, that was fun. And I can't wait to get into more stuff with Mileven, but have to work my way there.

And as always, **REVIEWS** are **GREATLY** appreciated! Thank you all for reading and for your patience!

8. Into The Void

Wow, thank you all again for the wonderful reviews! I'm glad everyone is continuing to enjoy this story! Not much to update, but that's usually a good thing.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything.

Her eyes follow the tall figure that is Mike as he nervously stands to his feet and announces that he's going to order some pizza. After Max's last comment, it wasn't difficult to understand why Mike was so flustered. For, she knows her cheeks must be glowing a bright red as well. And she quickly understands that Mike tends to take a lot of scrutiny from his beloved friends.

And it seems Dustin isn't the only one who enjoys taunting Mike in that matter.

"I'm going to see if he needs any help" Max throws her thumb over her shoulder gesturing to Mike as she stands and moves into the kitchen.

Dustin and Lucas are continuing to bicker with one another, so El sits complacently in her spot as she fiddles with the ends of her sleeves, her eyes still on Mike as Max startles him in the kitchen.

"You really like him, huh?" the smooth voice jostles El so suddenly that she literally jumps in her seat, her eyes going wide as she turns to see that Will, and his sleeping Anima come to sit in Mike's vacated spot.

"What?!" her voice squeaks out as she tries to assess Mike's friend.

His warm eyes are soft and endearing, and his half smile speaks a million words.

He scoffs at her as he leans in close, "Don't worry he likes you too".

El's mouth drops open in shock as she shakes her head furiously, "Wh-what...no, we just...we just met...I mean" she stutters inconsolably to the boy and his smile only grows as he laughs.

She can feel herself blushing a thousand different shades of red, as she seals her mouth shut, not wanting to embarrass herself anymore.

"Sorry" he starts, "Mike's really easy to tease, and it seems you are too" he shrugs.

El pulls her eyebrows together, frowning.

And at her expression, Will waves his hands frantically before her, "Oh! I'm sorry I didn't mean to-" but then El cracks and a smile pulls at her face. Will scoffs, "You were just kidding" he laughs.

El nods, "Well, it seems that Mike and I are the only one who can *take* the jokes" she teases.

Will lets out a huff of air, "Yeah, Mike's used to it from us. Sorry about that by the way, it's just-" and he hesitates slightly as if assessing what he's about to say is right or not.

El's impatience takes the better of her, "Just...what?" she muses.

Will sighs, "Well, we tend to give Mike a rough time about his lack of dating".

She nods to this, "I can see that".

"So, for him to be so enraptured by you...it's just a surprise, ya know" he shrugs his shoulders deeper.

This information surprises El slightly, "Wait, you mean he's never even had an interest in girls?" she can't help but ask.

"Uh, I'm sure he's liked girls, but I've known Mike for forever, and I've never seen him look at a girl like he does with you" his voice is soft.

El looks at him dead in the eyes, to see if there's any hint of lying or teasing. But, she can see that Will seems to be the voice of reason between the group of misfit friends. His eyes show the truth.

But, she shakes her head, "Look, I just think he's being nice, I mean, he did help me out, A LOT", she adds. "But, I don't know" she looks away, but can't help but flash a glance in Mike's direction.

She sees that he and Max have their heads bent together and their whispering wildly at one another. A sly expression is on Max's face, and El finds herself curious as to what they're talking about. However, Dustin and Lucas's bickering hides their conversation.

"You look at him the same way" Will's voice once again pulls El from her thoughts. She turns her head back to him, quirkling an eyebrow in return.

Will nods to the direction of the kitchen, "I mean, just now, the way you look at him, it's something you don't see everyday".

El ducks her head, flushing once again.

She shakes her head at him, her emotions getting the better of her "Look just because we almost-" and she stops herself dead realizing what she's about to say, her eyes go wide.

"Just because you almost...what?" Will presses, his teasing smile only grew wider.

El sputters for a second, not sure what she wants to say, thankfully though Mike's voice breaks the awkwardness.

"Okay, pizzas have been ordered" he nervously smiles, clapping his hands together.

"Geez Mike, I've never seen you that excited about pizza before" Dustin says, finally ending his and Lucas' quarreling.

Mike gives him a fierce look, shutting the boy up immediately.

"Anyways" Lucas tries to pull the group's attention back. "What are we going to do about El's sister, I mean, she was taken, and it sounds like there are some *pretty* bad guys involved in all of this".

El frowns at his words, knowing that they are true. It's one thing for Mike to have already volunteered his safety, but his group of friends with whom she's just met, something doesn't feel right about it.

She decides to speak up, "Look I-" she starts and everyone's eyes turn to her, she can feel her usual shyness washing over her, she fiddles

with her sleeves going to speak again, "I really appreciate that you guys want to help but...I don't want to put any of you in danger" she said sincerely. Her eyes move across each of theirs until they settle on Mike's.

There's a deep worry written within his dark eyes, and he's the first to step in.

"El, we've already told you, we're willing to help you, no matter what" he states firmly.

"But-" she starts and a hand on her shoulder stops her, she looks to Will whose giving her a knowing look, "Hey, we've already agreed to help, you can't throw us out easily".

"Besides, when a party member is in need of assistance, we have to help" Dustin nods to her.

El feels herself soften, and a slight burning behind her eyes, she's never had people, let alone people she's just met be so sincere with words.

Mike moves around his coffee table and sits on the other side of her, he takes his hands in hers, giving her that warm smile that makes her heart stir. "We're doing this together El. All of us".

A stray tear escapes her eyes and she smiles at him and then the others, "Thank you" she whispers a silence falls upon them.

They choose to keep the topics light before the pizza appears about an hour later. Mike feels like his face is permanently stained red from his friends stories that they had been going on about since El's initial hesitancy towards them helping her.

Dustin, of course, kicking them off, wanting to calm El's emotions.

And, he starts with a doozy, about the one of many times Mike toppled down his parents wooden stairs at his childhood home and down into the basement.

"He was like a baby giraffe! Every month he seemed to grow an inch

and just couldn't walk straight!" Dustin laughed as he told the story of Mike taking almost a nose dive halfway down the stairs carrying a plate of cookies his mom had made them.

"The cookies went EVERYWHERE and Mike just face planted the floor!" He continues, his body shaking with laughter as he sits on the armrest of the opposite couch.

He can hear El's delicate laughter from beside him, and he knocks his shoulder against hers.

"I'm glad you find my pain funny" he teases, and El wipes away a tear from laughing so much.

"I'm sorry, but you were pretty accident prone, weren't you?" she gives him a teasing smirk.

Even though it sucks having his friends relay some of his most unfortunate events to a very pretty girl, he's happy to see her smiling and laughing along with the rest of them. He knew with El telling her in depth life story wasn't easy. And jumping right back into it didn't seem like the best idea. So, when Dustin had begun to tell El about their childhood, it was a great tension breaker. Even if it was at his own expense.

But, he was thankful that Will had brought up the time Dustin had cried once when the fire alarm went off during school, that one shut up Dustin pretty quickly.

Finally, there's a knock on his door, and Mike heads to the noise greeting the pizza man and exchanging his money for the tower of pizza boxes that are stacked on top of one another.

Dustin is by his side immediately as he grabs half of the pizzas and heads for the kitchen.

"Chow time!" he shouts as he throws open the nearest box, and immediately, Animas and humans surround Mike's island.

Mike sets down the rest of the boxes with a huff, opening them as the fresh steam rolls out.

Mike picks up a piece of meat lover and hands it to Pitch who's staring at him with wide eyes.

"I swear, this is the only time I see you get excited" he teases his partner as the wolf takes it with a snap of his mighty jaw.

"Yeah, because you hardly ever order pizza" Pitch states, his words muffled by the pizza he's trying to consume.

Suddenly a warmth washes over Mike. It's so calm and pure it causes a shiver to run down his spine. It relaxes him immediately.

He looks suddenly at El who has shyly approached the kitchen, unlike his friends who just about bombarded the small area.

His eyes are wide as El moves her hands delicately from the top of Pitch's head and down to his upper neck.

He sees Pitch's eyes roll back into his head in pleasure, and Mike can totally feel it too. The complete wash of delicacy, and comfort. Usually, it's quite taboo for others to touch your Anima, but Mike is frozen in the feeling that El is sending through Pitch.

El immediately freezes and pulled her hand away from Pitch as if she had touched something hot. Her eyes swivel to his quickly, a guilty look on her face.

"I'm...I'm so sorry" she whispers shaking her head, as if ashamed by her actions.

With her hand pulled away from Pitch, Mike finally shakes himself out of his moment of pure bliss.

"No, no, don't worry about it" Mike approaches her quickly.

"I...I didn't mean to just pat him, he's just...so fluffy" she hides her smirk as she ducks her head.

Mike reaches out and gently touches El's forearm, and she hesitantly looked him in the eye.

"El" he breathes, "Don't worry about it, it's...uh... it was-" but he

didn't want his words to come off as weird or creepy. As he wanted to say how nice it felt, but he felt that those words didn't seem appropriate.

Pitch looks up at her, "Yeah, don't worry about it, you've got a nice touch, it felt nice" he gives her a wolfish grin.

Mike wants to facepalm himself as he watches El's face pinken at the wolfs words. She flicks her eyes back to Mike, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Uhhh-" he honestly has nothing to say.

"Yeah Mike", Dustin moves over to him patting him roughly on the shoulder, his mouth full of food as he speaks, "It seems you really enjoyed that".

He *seriously* wished he had better friends.

"Dustin!" Mike growls angrily at his friend who only turns away with his hands in the air.

Uncertain, he turns back to El who's still giving him a shy look, "I really am sorry, I know it's not appropriate to touch someone's other Anima without asking".

Mike's a bit relieved that either El doesn't seem to be put off by Dustin's words, or, she has merely grown to accept the fact that his friends are kind of assholes and they will tease him mercilessly till the day he dies.

Mike softens, "No really, it's okay, honestly, it's not the first time" he shrugs.

El gives him a pointed look. He can't help but smile at her look, her face is turned in a way that he finds very cute.

"For some reason, people find Pitch adorable and patable" and at this he pats his partner firmly on the head, Pitch growls in return as he makes his way away from them.

"I just know that it doesn't always...feel...right" she shrinks away.

Mike knows that she's talking about her own past history with people not just touching, but torturing her and Veda, he can only imagine what trauma they must have faced.

But, he understands too. Since Pitch isn't that small, it's fairly common for a passerby's hand to skim Pitch's fur. Most of the time Mike just lets the feeling flow through him. However, there are times where even if the touch is light, he can feel the malice, or anger or any other negative feelings that flow from the person accidentally touching Pitch and straight into himself. It usually takes him a minute or longer to shake those feelings.

And, even though his friends and family members have touched Pitch, which he doesn't usually mind, he's never felt the way he did when El touches Pitch. Because it wasn't her first time, and he secretly hoped it wouldn't be the last.

He reaches for her again, for some reason, he liked the physical contact between them.

Lowering his head he whispers to her "El, please don't worry about it, your touch is *really* nice, I didn't mind it".

Her eyes widen at his words, and her body relaxes, she nods in understanding, and Mike flashes her a grin as he points to the boxes of pizza, "So, what would you like?"

She feels content at the warm contents that now fill her stomach. Even though she didn't say anything, she was quite hungry. Especially since they had missed lunch due to Mike's friends arriving out of the blue.

Now, they once again gravitated towards the living room. Mike moving around his kitchen as he pulls multiple coffee mugs from his cabinets and arranges them on his kitchen island. The warm aroma of coffee wafts through his apartment, closing her eyes, El sighed in contentment at the smell.

Mike's voice breaks her from her daze, "Coffee?" he asks holding out a mug towards her.

She opens her eyes slowly and meets Mike's dark gaze. Smiling, she takes the cup from him as he sits beside her, his new weight causing her to shift a bit closer to him.

The rest of the group reaches forward towards the steaming mugs of coffee from the tray Mike has placed before them. She gingerly reaches forward to grab some sugar and milk as she swirls it into her mug.

It's fairly quiet as they sit in a comfortable silence, allowing for their dinners to digest.

But, it doesn't surprise her when the silence is finally broken.

"So-" Lucas starts and all eyes are on him, and El knows what he's going to ask.

"What's the big plan? I mean...we can't just assume that things are going to get better" he shrugs his shoulders.

She hears Mike huff beside her and sees that he's giving his friend an incredulous look. But now it's El's turn to comfort Mike as she reaches out her hand and plants it softly on his wrist.

He turns his head quickly towards her and she gives him a gentle look.

"Lucas is right. Things aren't going to get better, he's still going to be looking for me" she gazes about her new group of friends who nod at her words.

"How did he find you guys in the first place anyways?" Will questions.

This particular questions freezes El in her seat. Truthfully, she had been so scared about her own life and Kali's that she hadn't even thought of that notion.

She can feel everyone's tense gaze upon her and as El moves between each of their eyes, she just shakes her head.

"I...I don't know" her voice is soft as she looks down into her lap,

feeling slightly ashamed for not knowing the answer to what seems to be a very simple question.

"Yeah. I mean, it's kind of weird that he just showed up out of nowhere after many years, and besides, you were from Hawkins, and he just kind of disappeared after the lab got shut down" Mike reasons.

"Wait" and at this Max holds up her hand, her blue eyes widening almost comically.

"Hawkins lab, you mean that weird place from our hometown?" she stresses.

El nods, "Yes, that's where I was born...experimented on" she can feel the heaviness in her voice.

"So, you were in Hawkins, that lab!?" Dustin exclaims leaning forward in his seat.

"Yes Dustin, she was there the whole time we were" she can hear Mike's voice is full of sadness.

"Holy shit, how does that even happen!? We...we could of-" Dustin shakes his head as words fail him as runs an unsteady hand through his curly hair, his face contorting wildly. While Max, Lucas and Will sit up straighter in their seats, their eyes widening in realization.

"Dustin, we get it, it's crazy, but let's not-" and Mike stops suddenly, and El peeks her eyes up just so. She can see that Mike is giving Dustin a hard stare. And she knows what he's trying to communicate to his loud friend, *'Don't upset her more'*.

And El feels grateful for the man sitting beside her. Because she's already been through it once with him, she'd rather not get into it with the rest of his friends.

Dustin takes a steadying breath, and nods slowly.

"So, this asshole Brenner, he kidnapped your sister?" Dustin asks firmly.

El nods, "Yes, we moved away from there five years ago after we

escaped. We knew he'd be tracking us down but...we were careful, we never..." and her voice fails her.

Her mind begins to go into overdrive as she thinks about her sister and how she had allowed herself to escape. And now, now Kali was probably back somewhere, locked away, Brenner just waiting for the right moment to start his testing once again.

A silent tear escapes her eye, and she tries to hide it, but it's almost impossible because...she's scared.

It doesn't take long for the tears to keep dripping down onto her dark jeans. A light splattering noise echoes against the silence that now surrounds her as her tears fall.

She can feel the anxiety, worry and fear creep up within her, and she begins to experience the wall of darkness swoop in around her as she hunches forward.

However, her body doesn't go very far as a pair of warm, strong arms envelop her.

Her breath caught in her throat and her tears stop. The arms squeeze tighter, and she realizes that Mike is holding her firmly in his embrace.

"It's okay El. We promise, we'll figure this all out, you don't need to be scared" Mike's voice is slightly muffled as his mouth falls to the side of her head, buried in her thick hair.

It's as if he read her mind. Felt every emotion that was coursing through her veins at an alarming rate. But, just his simple embrace halted the onslaught of what she knew could have developed into a full blown panic attack. And for some reason, just his simple touch stopped it all.

She raises her head slowly and she sees the faces of her newfound friends looking at her. And, instead of seeing pity or sadness, she sees fierce determination, and dedication there instead.

"El, you don't need to worry with us around, we'll be sure to protect you" Will states firmly as he adjusts his still sleeping Anima in his

grasp.

"No, you're safe with us," Mike's voice is gentle as he slowly pulls away from her, but not fully retrieving his arms from around her, instead, he holds her gently, as if he were a warm security blanket.

She relaxes in his comforting grip.

Max looks to her, "So, how do we even begin looking for your sister. I mean, she could be anywhere" she shrugs while the others nod.

El sighs, "I have a way, it's just...it's a little weird" her voice is quiet.

"What do you mean?" Mike looks down at her, as she looks up to him.

She gives a small half smile, "Remember when I said I could look for people?"

He nods, and so do the others.

"That's how I find her".

Like a well oiled machine, Dustin, Luas and Mike move about Mike's apartment hunting for the supplies she asked for, as she settles herself more firmly into Mike's well worn couch.

Max and Will sit on the other couch, exchanging soft words, waiting for the others to return.

She's trying to focus on her breath, trying to calm the anxiety that stirs uncomfortably within the depths of her stomach.

Dustin, Lucas and Mike come out of Mike's room, each holding an item.

"Here's a box of tissues" Lucas places the item in front of El.

"And one of Mike's old ties" he can't help but throw a look to Mike who rolls his eyes in return. But El smiles as she takes the dark blue tie in her hands as she swipes her fingers over the smooth material.

"And here-" Mike starts as he places a retro, 80's something radio before her, "Is my old radio" he finishes as he fishes the bent antennae from behind the radio.

A smile forms on her face, a flash of remembrance going across her mind as she thinks of the very similar radio she had back at the hideout.

Mike fiddles with the knobs as the radio shrieks to life, causing the party to jump slightly.

"Sorry" Mike mumbles as he fiddles with the volume and then he begins to fish for a station.

El listens carefully, and when her ears pick up exactly what she needs, she holds out a hand when Mike lands on a stream of static, "No, stop there".

He looks back at her with a peculiar look. She nods at him, "Yes, that's what I need". With one last quirk of an eyebrow Mike simply nods his head, as he turns up the volume, static filling the apartment. He moves to sit back beside her.

El lets out a huff of breath as she fiddles nervously with the tie in between her fingers. She looks about her new friends. Suddenly Veda comes up next to her and she welcomes her Anima's comfort.

"So, this usually takes me a minute, but...with the static and my powers I'm able to go into this place, this...void" she begins to explain as the party leans in as if she's about to tell a scary story.

"Everything's black, it's empty. But, if I focus enough, I can find who I'm looking for and hopefully I can find out where Kali is" she explains.

"How long does it take?" Max asked worriedly.

El shrugs, "Depends on how quickly I can connect to her".

"And, what happens when you find her?" Lucas whispers, licking his lips anxiously.

"Not much, I can't usually talk to people in the void, but, hopefully I can see where she is" she finishes.

"Well, we'll all be right here" Mike states firmly as he rests a gentle hand on her leg. And even though it's not skin to skin contact, she can feel his warmth radiating within him.

"I know" she gives him a soft smile and she enjoys watching him flush lightly. It's the last thing she sees as she closes out the light as she brings the tie up around her eyes, tying it firmly behind her head.

She focuses on the static, her breathing, and a familiar scent that begins to overwhelm her senses as she falls into the void.

Her eyes flick open into the oh too familiar atmosphere that she had come to avoid the last five years. Even after being forced into the inky black hole that she herself dubbed the 'void' too many times during her years locked up in the lab, and avoiding it like the plague, it's like she never left.

The water beneath her feet is cool, as is the atmosphere around her. A shiver runs up her spine, recalling particular memories that she'd rather not revisit.

She forces herself to calm down and focus, "Kali...Kali" she mutters under a hushed breath.

"NO! You can't do this to me again!" her sister's screams echo into the empty space.

El spins, the water sloshing around her and spraying her bare arms with coldness.

"Kali!" El shouts as she sees her sister tied to a cold metal chair.

She begins to run towards the girl, "Kali!" she can't help but yell once again.

But, another figure appears, El freezes.

The familiar white jacket cascades about him, matching his snow

white hair and silver Anima that sits perched in its usual spot upon his shoulder.

El feels bile moving up her esophagus as she sees the man who haunts her nightmares. Clear as day, as if five years never passed.

He moves around Kali who struggles against her restraints as if he were a lion stalking his prey. His arms folded perfectly behind his back, his eyes cool and evaluating.

He tuts, "My dear number Eight, it is so good to see you again".

His icy voice causes El to shutter.

Kali cries out, "Let me go!" her voice is raw.

"Oh, but, you and Eleven were very bad. You ran away from your papa, and now...now I need to make sure that won't happen again" his voice smooth and steely.

"You...you were *never* our father" Kali growls, her body now shaking with malice.

"But, I was. And you and your sister were not very nice to me" he shakes his head slowly.

"Bastard! You showed us no love, no empathy, just pain!" she tries to lunge at him, but the binds around her hold firm.

"Tough love, I call it" he says as he moves a long finger in her direction, pulling at her chin, but Kali yanked away from his touch.

"Listen, follow the rules and nothing happens, that's all I asked of you girls" he continues to pace around her.

"It took me years to find you, now I just need your sister" he grins slowly.

El feels her heart tug at his words.

Kali lets out a strained laugh, "You won't find her".

Brenner stops in his place and looks to her, "Oh, but my dear daughter, I will. Now that I have you, she'll come looking for you. She'll know exactly where to find you".

And then, to El's horror, Brenner turns and practically faces her. Their eyes meet, and as if he can feel her, he looks her dead in the eye, "Isn't that right...Eleven?"

El stutters backwards, as she shakes her head wildly, "No...no...NO!" she screams out, holding her head as every ounce of fear washed over her. The darkness fades as her screams chase her back into the light.

"El, El, EL! It's okay, it's okay, I'm right here!" a gentle voice pulls her back into what she knows is the real world. As she feels a gentle touch on her arm.

She can feel the scream dying in her throat as her arms thrash about, she's pulling at the tie around her head, desperate to be free of the darkness.

When the light meets her eyes she sees that the party is pulled back in shock, but Mike who is beside her reaches for her, immediately she dives into his embrace.

Her tears are hot and heavy as they cascade down her face. They meet with the blood that she knows is tricking out of her nose. She can taste the iron and salt as she tucks in her lips to hold back a cry.

She tucks her head into Mike's neck.

He's rubbing her back soothingly, "El, hey, it's okay, we're right here" he says softly, trying to get her to calm down.

El feels her breathing coming out quick and fast. She closes her eyes tightly as she attempts to calm herself.

"El, you're okay" Veda says gently as she nuzzles up against her.

And it's then with Mike's warm embrace and Veda's near presence when she feels herself finally calming.

She tries to bury herself in the feelings around her, *"I'm safe, I'm okay"*

she keeps repeating to herself and finally, she tepidly pulls herself away from Mike's embrace.

He follows her as he pulls his head back as well. She can see his ebony eyes are filled with concern, but also a relief.

"I'm okay" she says slowly, reaching out a hand to pat Veda who moves into her gesture.

"Woah, that was intense" Dustin states, as he rubs his hands on his pants anxiously.

Max gives him a quick whack on the arm, "Dustin!" she glares at him as he says "Ow" and rubs the spot Max hit him.

El gives a small laugh, "No. I totally get it, it is intense".

The party looks at her.

She notices that Mike's hand is still wrapped protectively around her, and she sinks into the gesture.

"Did...did you see anything?" he asks tentatively.

She searches his eyes and she nods, "Yes, I found her".

As if everyone was holding their breath, a universal sigh seems to escape everyone's lungs.

"Well, that's good...right?" Lucas face brightens, but there's some hesitancy behind his words.

El shakes her head, "Brenner has her".

Max lets out a gasp, "Seriously?"

El nods in confirmation. "Yes. And...they're back in Hawkins".

"But, how did you know all that?" Will questions.

El closes her eyes as she remembers clear as day, the man who held her captive, his eyes locking straight with hers.

"He...he was there in the void. He had Kali tied up, he-" she started, but something held her back from stating what he actually did. "I could just tell, he brought her back to where it all began. No one would suspect him going back", at least she knew those words were true. She *knew*, she *felt* exactly where they were.

She rubbed at her tired eyes. Not sure what their next step was going to be.

"Well, that's a lot to think about" Will notes sadly.

El tries to hide the tiredness that surrounds her, but she can feel Mike's eyes on her.

"Yeah, today was a lot to take in and-" El looks up to see Mike moving his eyes about her, "And I'm sure that took a lot out of El. Why don't we reconvene tomorrow, you know, fresh brains" he suggests.

El sags in relief, thankful that Mike can read her easily.

The others nod in agreeance. "That sounds good to me, I'm beat anyways" Dustin stretches his arms over his head letting out a loud yawn.

Everyone moves to stand to their feet, their Anima's following close behind as Mike and El guide them to his door.

Lucas holds the door open as Max, Dustin and Will make their way out into the hallway.

It hits El then, that it's a little weird in context. She and Mike stand on the other side of the doorway, she with her arms crossed loosely around her midsection, Mike with his hands in his pockets. It's almost as if this is a natural thing for them, as if this has happened a million times before. Their friends come over for food and a good time, Mike and El chauffeuring them to the door to say goodnight. Next, the door will close and it will be just the two of them. And even though that's all it's been for the last couple of days, she sees the knowing looks the rest of the party is giving them, and El can't help but blush.

"Well, it was great meeting you El" Max flashes her a bright smile as

she holds her Anima within her arms. El gives her a grin in return, "It was so nice to meet you too, all of you" she moves her eyes to the rest of the friends.

They all give her winning smiles as they turn to head down the hallway.

And of course, Dustin's the one to end the night on an awkward note as he yells to herself and Mike, "Goodnight you two! Don't have too much fun!" and he dashes along with Dart down the hallway as Mike moves to yell at his friend, but the curly haired man disappears around the corner before Mike can get a word in edgewise.

A stream of giggles erupts from El as Mike comes back towards the doorway, his face more red than anything.

He gives her a look as she tries to hide her laughter behind her hands.

A frustrated huff leaves his mouth.

"Well, you certainly have some colorful friends" she cocks her also redface to the side.

Mike nods slowly, "Yeah, real colorful" he smirks at her as he steps into his apartment, and shuts the door behind him.

And now, it's just the two of them. Alone.

A silence befalls them as they shuffle awkwardly on their feet, El struggles to meet Mike's eyes, and she sees he's having the same problem.

Mike clears his throat, "Uhm, I'm just going to pick up the pizza boxes and then head to bed. I'm sure you're really tired to".

El nods in agreement, "Yeah, going into the void can be tiring".

Mike moves towards the kitchen as he moves all the spare pieces of pizza into one box. El watches from the side.

He looks up at her, "El, don't worry, you can head to bed. You look

exhausted".

She narrows her eyes at him, teasingly, and he backs tracks slightly, his face faltering, "No, I didn't...I didn't mean it as a bad thing. I just...*sigh*" he stops as he runs a nervous hand through his hair.

El giggles at his awkwardness as she moves around the island, she places a delicate hand on his arm, and their gaze meets.

She tries to convey every feeling, every thank you to him because she doesn't think he understands just exactly how much he helped her today.

His eyes soften, "Mike, thank you" she says gently.

She watches as the corner of his lip pulls upwards slightly. "You don't have to thank me, that's what friends are for" he shrugs.

El squeezes his arm in a comforting way. A beat passes between them. And even though they're alone, they're both exhausted, she can see the dark rings beginning to grow beneath his own eyelids. The moment from earlier has passed, and she thinks she's okay with it.

"Good night Mike" she gives him a shy smile.

"Night El" he whispers back. And with that, she heads towards his guest bedroom, Veda in tow.

She can feel his eyes on her as she approaches the door, she turns as she moves to shut the door.

Their eyes catch, and they stay connected with one another as El slowly shuts the door. Feeling slightly sad as their gaze breaks, and even though he's only on the other side of the door, she wants nothing more than to be with him again.

AHHH! That one took me a bit longer, but I was also working on getting a chapter out for Watching Her Fall In Love as well. There's another part I wanted to add in here, butttt, I think it will fit and lead better with the next chapter, let's just say there's a lot of sweet Mileven fluff that will follow!

This chapter was also tricky because I had to lead into finding Kali and after many rewrites, I think I got it. It's a lot for the party to take in with their first time meeting El, but needed to get things rolling.

Anyways, thank you all for reading! I can't wait to get the next chapter out! And I hope you all enjoyed this one!

Till next time and as always REVIEWS ARE MUCH APPRECIATED! You are all awesome!

9. The Nightmare

I hope you all are still enjoying this story. Thank you to those who reviewed the last chapter!

Disclaimer: I don't own anything.

His eyes never leave hers as she tentatively closes the door that will separate them till morning. Even though it's just an inch of wood, Mike can't help but feel a slight annoyance at the object as he sees El's eyes warm eyes disappear.

When the soft 'click' of the door is heard, his shoulders slump as he heaves a heavy sigh, casting his arms outwards and pushing his weight against them. His head drops as he shakes his head growling in defeat.

"You know, you can talk to her?" Pitch's voice causes Mike to look up at his partner.

Mike rolls his eyes as he begins to move about his small kitchen, picking up after the party.

"About what?" Mike grumbles, knowing that his Anima is going to have some kind of terse comeback.

"About how you like her".

And there it is, Mike thinks to himself and doesn't retort as he focuses on cleaning.

He hears his Anima sigh heavily, "You know, there's no harm in trying. I mean, I'm pretty sure it's a one in a million chance for us Anima's to change on the spot in meeting the other half of our soul. Look at Lucas and Max".

Mike feels his shoulders tense as he places the stack of pizza boxes by his door that he plans on recycling later. He knows there is truth to Pitch's words, but there's a deep fear that lingers within himself.

And of course, Pitch can't help to bring it up, "I know you have this

whole *issue* because of your parents and all bu-" he starts and Mike turns to him quickly, "This has *nothing* to do with my parents!" he bites back.

Pitch gives him a wistful look, and Mike's slightly surprised to see some sort of disappointment cross his features, "I'm apart of you Mike, when are you going to understand that?" he shakes his burly head and moves across the living room and heads towards their bedroom.

Mike huffs as he tightens his fists together in anger. He slumps forward at the kitchen sink, using his arms to brace himself. He can feel the frustration pulsing through him, both his own and Pitch's as well.

It's a concept Mike has never fully understood. For ages, he has always wondered what made him and Pitch so different from one another. He could never recount a time where he met another human and Anima that were like he and Pitch: unmatched. Or, that's what Mike felt like anyways.

He would always watch his friends, and now even El with Veda, and there was a surge of jealousy that rested within him.

Mike silently wished more often than not that they could go back, back to their childhood when things were good. It seemed that when Mike was an adolescent and Pitch had morphed into his wolf form is when things began to change between them. Beforehand, Mike felt connected with him, now, it was like they truly were two separate entities and it bothered him to no end.

Closing his eyes firmly and taking a deep breath, Mike shook off the rest of his thoughts as he washed his hands one last time and made his way into his room.

He cast a curious eye to see that Pitch was already curled up on his fancy bed and seemed to be asleep. Mike moved to his dresser as he stripped down to his boxer briefs and tossed on his favorite Star Wars sleep shirt.

Crawling into his bed he felt the exhaustion of the day hit him hard.

Although his mind swirled with a thousand different thoughts and feelings that left him awake. It wasn't until his eyes finally collapsed from fighting sleep, did he finally drift off.

However, it didn't feel like his slumber was for long, as an unsettling scream pulled him awake.

Her eyes flitted back and forth as she stared at the ceiling before her. One of her arms was tucked comfortably under her head that was supported by a fluffy pillow, as her other hand played absentmindedly with the comfy duvet cover that rested gently across her body.

She could feel the tiredness that hung heavily to her eyes, but her thoughts that were loud and obnoxious kept her from slumber.

"Can't sleep?" the voice of Veda caused El to turn her head towards her small Anima who was curled up on the other side of the large bed.

El could just barely make out the foxes glinting eyes in the darkness of the room. Knowing her partner had no trouble seeing her at night, she shrugged and moved her head back to its previous position, her eyes gazing towards the ceiling.

"It's okay to feel nervous" Veda continues, not shifting in the slightest as she talked.

A heavy sigh escapes from El, "I know. I just...it's hard for me to believe that Mike and his friends are willing to go into such a dangerous situation. Just for me" she whispers her last words.

"They care about you" Veda states simply.

El closes her eyes tightly, groaning, "Exactly. And I don't get *why*! They just met me, why are they willing to do this?"

A silence befalls them for a moment.

"Maybe they see who you are. They want to help you" the fox suggests.

El huffs, "I've never had anyone be so willing to help me before". She moves her arm from out under her head and moves it to join her other one. Now both of her hands play with the silky material of the bed cover.

"Well, maybe you've finally met some people who *actually* care about you" El picks up Veda's connotation. El knows that her Anima wasn't too fond of the group she and Kali had joined. Veda had never liked the antics they got up to just to survive.

El remembers the countless arguments they had over the group. Veda always pushing her to leave. But, El had no one else. Nowhere else to go. So, she was stuck.

But, El smiles slightly at her Anima's words. "Yes, they are really nice".

El feels something stir within her at Veda's next words, "Hmm, Mike especially".

Her cheeks redden. And she's pretty sure they were glowing even in the darkness of the room around them.

She scoffs though, "He's just being friendly".

"Friendly doesn't mean almost kissing" Veda fires back.

El's mouth drops open as she sits up suddenly and turns towards her Anima once again. She opens her mouth to speak, but the fox cuts her off, "Get some sleep El, goodnight" Veda whispers, and El sees the glint of her Anima's eyes disappear.

Knowing it's a losing situation, El flopped back onto the bed, casting her arms outwards.

Her eyes settle on the ceiling once again. And even though her thoughts swirl about her, the exhaustion that holds over her finally hits, as her eyes drift close.

The coldness is so dense it seeps into her bones. She wraps her arms tightly around herself, trying to hold in any warmth that might still be there.

It's dark all around her. The only things she can see is the smoky outline of her breath that permeates the air around her.

She casts her head in multiple directions, looking for some sort of light, any sort of person.

"Hello?" she calls out, her shivering voice echoing around her.

Her body shakes as the frigid temperature sinks deeper into her body.

She takes a tentative step forward, a wetness seeps into her bare feet, she looks down suddenly as a gasp of air escapes her mouth. It floats delicately in the air.

Her arms drop to the side as she looks around. She's in the void.

A panic travels up her spine, "Hello!?" she cries once again, her voice more desperate as her breath quickens.

Her chest rises and falls in quick repetition as she begins to feel the panic rise within her.

She runs forward, her face frozen in worry as she looks about in the endless space.

"Mike...Mike!?" she cries out.

"No one can hear you Eleven", his cool, venomous voice causes her to freeze.

She doesn't turn around, she doesn't need to, to know who the owner of the voice is.

El remains rooted to her spot, as she tries to calm her breathing.

She shakes her head, "No, no...you're not here" she mutters to herself.

"Oh, but I very much am Eleven. I'm here, in your mind" she can hear his voice getting closer, so she turns around slowly.

And even though she doesn't want to see his face, she stares him directly in the eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she questions trying to keep her voice even.

He cracks a devilish smile at her. "It's not very hard to get into your mind Eleven. Not when you're so open and vulnerable".

She furrows her face in confusion, "What do you mean?"

"You're so emotionally overwhelmed that it makes you weak, letting your minds guards break with ease".

"I'm not emotionally weak" she spits back.

"But you are. And you know it, and because of that, it will be easy to find you" he takes a slow step forward and El mimics him in the opposite direction.

"No, this isn't real, you aren't here" she shakes her head in disbelief.

Another quirk of his lips, "But you know that isn't true. You know this is real, you know that I'm getting closer to finding you, and it's causing you to become weak."

El lets out a stream of hot air from her nose, "There's no way you'd be able to find me".

Brenner gives her a surprised look, "But I think there is, and...who's this Mike fellow anyways?"

El tries to keep her face unreactive, but she knows her eyes widen in fear, and it's all he needs.

"That's what I thought. It won't be long now Eleven" he grinned wickedly at her.

"NO!" she shouts, her hands tightening into fists, "NO!" she screams as she casts out her hands towards Brenner as he's thrown back by the force of her powers.

She watches as he catapults into the air, as his figure disperses into the blackness around her.

Her chest feels tight as her heart beats rapidly against her chest.

The tears burn as they cascade from her eyes.

El can feel the burning sensation within her, the rage, she lets out a long, terrified scream.

She's still screaming bloody murder as she feels herself being shaken.

"EL!" she hears a man's voice calling out to her. Hands are on her shoulders as she's being shaken.

"NO, NO, NO!" she keeps shouting, some sense of reality hitting her as she thrashes out her hands, making contact with something.

She hears a huff of air escape the person. She concentrates, and the shaking stops, she is unable to take in her surroundings due to the darkness that's around her.

"El, let him go!" Veda's voice causes reality to hit El like a ton of bricks.

"El...it's me" she hears a strangled voice beside her.

"Mike!?" she cries out and she realizes that she's holding him back with his powers, she immediately lets him go.

She hears him take in a deep breath as he moves around in the dark. Her eyes squint at the sudden brightness of the lamp he flicks on.

Her eyes are immediately on his.

She can see the multiple emotions that are flickering across his face as he struggles to catch his breath, and she finds she's doing the same.

"Are you okay?" he asks tentatively as he stays frozen in his spot, unsure as to what he should be doing.

It dawns on her that she was dreaming, that it wasn't real.

But it felt real, her mind tells her.

"El?" she turns to Veda who is also looking at her with extreme concern.

Then it all sinks in, and she lets the terror flow through her.

She shakes her head, and the tears begin to flow.

"El are you-" Mike begins to move towards her, and El moves so quickly because she needs anything to feel safe. She grabs ahold of his arms and tugs him roughly towards her.

She buries herself into his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist tightly as she sobs into his chest.

El can feel Mike freeze at the suddenness of the contact, but it only takes him a half second to move and wrap his arms around her small frame. El sighs in between sobs at the contact.

His hands begin to move up and down her back in a soothing motion, as she allows herself to break in his arms.

There's a steady silence that surrounds them, and El isn't sure how long they stay there. Mike with half a leg on the bed, and the other stabilizing him on the floor. While El curls herself up into him, practically sitting in his lap.

"You're okay, I'm right here" Mike's soft voice keeps repeating the same phrase over and over again, and El melts each time he says them, as he gently rocks them.

She can feel his warm breath tickling the side of her neck, as her crying finally settles.

El snuffles, trying to eradicate the mucus that has now run down her face and caused her nose to get stuffy.

As she pulls back slowly, Mike doesn't remove his arms from around her.

She moves one of her arms from his waist as she wipes at her red rimmed eyes. She casually glances up at him and he's looking down at her, she lets out a half-hearted chuckle.

"I'm sorry" she chokes as she tries to compose herself.

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?" his voice is low.

El shakes her head, "For crying all over you" she gestures to his *very* soaked shirt.

And she can't help but let out another slight chuckle as her bleary eyes catch what's emblazoned on his sleep shirt.

Mike gives her a look of confusion before she pulls back a bit more and she tugs at her night shirt.

His eyes widen in shock as he looks between her shirt and his. They're identical, almost down to the amount of fade that the logo shows from use.

"Well" he laughs, "Great minds think alike" he gives her a warm smile.

El nods at this as she can't help but pull at the bottom of her shirt and pull it up towards her face, dabbing at her eyes.

She watches as Mike turns away slightly, his face reddening slightly, and she stupidly realizes that she's probably giving him a total peek at her stomach.

She drops the shirt from her hand, her own cheeks reddening "Oh, sorry, just...a nervous habit" she tries to make light of the situation.

Mike turns back towards her shaking his head, "No worries" he flashes her another smile.

And even though she wants to return it, she can't. There's a heaviness that falls on her as if she was carrying a hundred pound backpack. She ducks her head.

"Hey", Mike says gently as she feels his hand gracing her chin as he tilts it upwards. El keeps her eyes cast downwards, not wanting to meet his eyes.

"You don't have to be sorry for crying" he starts and when she still doesn't look at him, he sighs, "El, come on. Look at me" he pleads.

And even though she really doesn't want to, with a heavy breath she raises her tired eyes and their brown eyes meet.

He's giving her a gentle look as he slowly moves his hands about her face, pulling at the strands of hair that have stuck to her face from the tears. He guides them to rest behind her ear. Their eyes never leave one another.

"What happened?" his voice quiet, but even.

El slumps her shoulders, she knew he was going to ask her what happened.

"El, tell him" Veda makes her presence known by nudging the side of her arm.

She looks down at the foxes worried eyes. Even though they don't experience each other's dreams, they know when a nightmare has invaded their peaceful sleep.

El huffs, and then turns back to Mike who is waiting patiently.

"I...I had a dream about him...Brenner" her voice cracks. "But, it was weird" she scrunches her face.

"Weird, how?" Mike asks.

El shrugs, "I was...I was in the void, and he was there and...it was like he was *actually* there, like...it wasn't a dream but...it was?" she looks up at Mike with uncertainty.

He nods slowly, "So, he freaked you out?"

"That's an understatement. He said he would find me, and..." her mind drifts to what he had said about Mike, and finding him as well.

"And?" Mike pushes.

She looks at him, and the concern and worry is written plainly on his face. She knows she needs to be truthful, "And...he said he'd find me. Find you" she turns away from him.

"Me?" he asks startled.

El nods her head, "Yeah, that's why...I don't know" she huffed as she brings up her hands to run them through her wild curls, "I don't know if it was a dream or not. It felt so real."

"It felt like I was in the void. The same dark, empty space, the cold environment, the water on the floor" she explains as she looks off, distracted by her own thoughts.

Another silence falls before them.

But Mike finally breaks it as he reaches out to her, "Hey" he says gently, resting a hand on her arm. She pulls her eyes up to look at him, "Whether it was real or not, it still sounds super creepy, I mean...who wouldn't wake up freaked out," he shrugs.

El softens. A feeling of relief washing over her.

"Thanks...for being here" she whispers.

Mike nods as a small smile plays at the corner of his mouth. "Anytime", he whispers back.

They stare at each other for a long moment, and El almost forgets her dream. But, she's brought back to reality when Mike begins to move his leg that's on the bed and slides it off, he stands to his feet.

El's eyes widen as he begins to move away from her.

"Well it seems like-" he starts, but he stops suddenly when El vice grips his forearm.

He gives her a curious look. And El stares at the man before her. His untamed hair is even more so due to sleep, and, she realizes then that not only is he in the same Star Wars shirt as her, but he's only wearing boxers.

Her face reddens as the next thought traverses through her mind. But she can't help it, her anxiety is too high.

"Stay" she almost whines.

Her soft eyes glisten with unshed tears as Mike's face turns into that of shock at her words.

Stammering, "Uh...you...you mean...here?" he gestures to the room.

El can only nod somewhat shamefully.

She knows it's weird and awkward, but there's something about his presence that calms her for some reason. Yes, she has Veda, but to have an actual human being near her while she sleeps is entirely different. She cannot count the times she and Kali shared the same bed when one of them couldn't sleep. El always seemed to have nightmares even if her sister was by her side, but just the notion of someone being right there if she needed it was enough.

"El, I-" he starts. And she knows she's pushing it, especially as she slides her hand downwards on his forearm and finds Mike's hand. She intertwines their fingers together. Her amber eyes flick to his dark ones.

"Please" she whispers again, voice soft and pleading.

And that's all it seems to take for Mike to release a breath of air before he nods towards the bed, "Scoot over" he states.

El exhales in relief as she scoots over in the queen sized bed. Veda jumps down from the bed. "I'm going out into the living room," she states, flicking her long, bushy tail into the air.

"Wait, you don't have to-" Mike starts just as he places a leg up onto the bed, but Veda casts him a smirk, "No worries, you're couch is comfy anyways" she raises an eyebrow at the two of them and she slinks out the semi-open door.

Mike exhales another long breath and El gives him a worried look. Feeling as if she might have overstepped her boundaries.

"Mike, you don't have to stay, I'm sorry...this was stupid", she laments, shaking her head.

"No!" Mike raises a hand out to her suddenly causing her to startle. "Sorry, I didn't mean to yell, I just...please, it's just...I've never shared

a bed with anyone" he mutters.

She shrugs, "Neither have I" she states gently.

Mike raises his head to look at her, curiously; surprised. She gives him a soft smile, knowing that her cheeks are flushed red.

He gives her an endearing look, "Oh...okay" a gentle smile.

El shifts underneath the bedcovers, as Mike settles above the sheets.

She rolls her eyes, "Mike".

He looks over to her, "Yeah?" he questions as he settles probably as far away as he possibly can from her, which she finds slightly disappoints her. But, she doesn't know if it's because he's uncomfortable or he's being shy. She chooses not to worry on the matter.

"You can move under the covers," she starts and then gives him a sly smile, "I promise I don't bite" and she's actually surprised by her own boldness.

Mike's mouth drops open suddenly, but he follows her demands as he shifts, causing the bed to stir once again. He settles himself underneath the very warm blankets, and El notices that he's shifted somewhat closer to her, now there is only about a foot between them instead of three or four. El smiles.

Mike reaches his long arm outwards and flicks the switch to the lamp on the bedside table off. The room is enveloped in darkness.

She turns slightly so that she is on her side, pulling the bedsheets up around her chin. A long yawn escapes her mouth as she feels Mike shift as well.

Feeling his breath on her face, she knows he has turned on his side as well.

She smiles into the dark, "Goodnight Mike," she says.

He lets out a short chuckle, "Goodnight El," he says back, sleep

causing his voice to become heavy.

Her worry is still heightened by the fear of nightmares that are sure to riddle her in the night. But her eyelids grow heavier with each minute that passes by.

She listens to the steadiness of Mike's breath as it eventually evens out, she allows it to lull her to sleep.

He really wasn't expecting his night to go as it did. He figured it would play out like any other night, even with El who had been sleeping in his spare bedroom.

Mike had never been awoken by a scream so loud that it caused his heart to nearly beat out of his chest.

Sitting up as if a lightning bolt had struck him, he moves his head wildly searching throughout the room looking for any sign of danger.

Another scream.

"It's El!" Pitch barks at him through the darkness that surrounds them.

It takes him a minute as he untangles his lanky limbs from the constraints of his bedsheets, once he is free he races out of his bedroom and makes a beeline for where El is.

He throws open the door, and even though it's fairly dark in her room, he can see her thrashing about in her bed.

"She won't wake up!" Veda's voice registers to his ear.

He begins to panic, but instinctively he moves towards El, placing his hands firmly on her shoulders shaking them.

"EL, EL, you've got to wake up!" he yells a bit louder than he intended to.

She continues to thrash about, "No, no!" she continues to cry, and Mike feels his heart break at the strain.

Then, she lets out another long scream as she sits up.

"EL!" he cries again, and in the darkness he can see the glint of her eyes as she opens them.

"NO, NO, NO!" she cries and the next thing he knows, he's frozen in place, and he feels like he's being strangled.

Veda reaches out to her, and he reassures her that it's him.

That's all it takes for El to release him, as Mike takes a deep breath, and moves around in the dark his hand blindly fishing for the bedside lamp. He flicks it on.

Their eyes are immediately locked on to one another. He can see the terror and fear written plainly on her face. He holds a hand up to his neck and rubs it absentmindedly, suddenly struck by the strength of her power.

But, he chooses not to focus on that now, he reaches out to her, but slowly, not wanting to startle her.

He's surprised when she doesn't respond to his or Veda's voice, but then, he's taken aback when she reaches out to him and pulls him close to her.

Even with a small physique, she is curiously strong. So, Mike falls into her.

Her head is on his chest and she begins to sob as she tightens her arms around his waist.

Despair fills him, and it only takes his brain a moment to respond as he wraps his arms around the girl, pulling her into a tight embrace.

He can feel the tears soaking through his t-shirt, but he doesn't care. All he wants is for the girl he's holding to understand that she's okay, that she's safe and in no harm.

Moving his hand slowly he begins to stroke her back in small circular motions. His touch is meant to be a sign that he's there with her, to express some sort of comfort. And it seems to work because he can

feel her head mold into his chest and her sobs begin to fade.

He adds in some comforting words as well, and he prays that they put her at ease.

Eventually, she slowly pulls her small frame away from him, sniffing as she does so.

Her red rimmed eyes break his heart as he watches her compose herself.

She tries to apologize but he shakes her off.

He's a bit surprised by a short burst of giggles that erupt from her as she points out their matching identical shirts. He'd be lying if he didn't swoon slightly at the realization, acknowledging that this girl was more perfect than she let on to be.

The flush that covers his face when she lifts her shirt to wipe at her swollen eyes is impossible to control as he catches sight of her stomach once again. He can't help but watch for a moment, that lovely male brain telling him to not look away.

It takes much of his resolve to do so.

Then, when he thinks everything is okay, even after El's bizarre explanation of her dream, he starts to leave, but she holds him back.

She asks him to stay with her, and he's pretty sure his heart stops right then and there.

Her pleading eyes and worried expression are what pull him towards her, unable to say no.

So, that's where he finds himself.

Tucked under the covers with a girl he is hopelessly falling for him dressed in a shirt and his boxers. And she in an identical shirt, and very short pajama shorts. An obvious dream for most males, and he finds himself *incredibly* lucky, but he's also petrified.

He's never shared a bed with anyone, let alone a girl. A *very* beautiful

girl to say the least.

But, her soft and warm words pull him in even tighter. So, when he settles under the covers after flicking off the lights he hears El shuffle and he's pretty sure she's turned towards him.

In the darkness he allows himself to turn towards her as well. He can feel her little puffs of air that escape her small mouth. He'd think it would annoy him, but instead he enjoys it. Relishing in the moment that he's so close to a girl, and he allows the thought to lull him to sleep.

So, when the sun creeps in from the morning rays, causing him to stir from his sleep, he's surprised as to how well rested he feels.

Everything is warm and comfortable, and there's a weight on his chest that causes him to melt back into the comfort that is held there.

His eyes try to open, but the alluring pleasure of the whole situation causes him to fight the urge to awaken.

But, a stirring beside him causes his eyes to finally spring open.

Glancing down, he realizes that a person, which after the haze of sleep fades away, is El.

His breath quickens as El nuzzles her nose deep into his neck, her left arm and leg are thrown over his torso and chest, holding onto him like a teddy bear. And he sheepishly realizes that his own left arm is tucked under her shoulder and is holding onto her tightly as well.

He doesn't know what to do. He's literally trapped.

Not that he *totally* minds because El seems to be deep in sleep, her face peaceful. But, what guy wouldn't call himself lucky to have such a wonderful woman like El cuddled up to them.

He relaxes slightly, laying his head back down on his fluffy pillow. It doesn't take long for him to begin to drift slightly in the realm that's just between being awake and asleep. His hand around El shoulders begins to move absentmindedly against her soft skin.

Just as he begins to settle once again into sleep, a muffled voice brings him back to the present, "That tickles".

Mike's hand freezes and his eyes are wide open again.

He once again doesn't know what to do, so he stays still as El pulls herself from her own sleep.

Her mess of brown hair is cascaded on his chest and she raises her head and turns to look at him with bleary eyes.

She blinks slowly, as she uses her right hand to pull the hair away from her face, "Mike?" she asks somewhat confused.

Mike swallows hard, "Uh, yeah, hi El" he says steadily.

And then, as if El realizes what's going on, she pushes herself up slightly, pressing into his chest, she takes in a quick breath. Her eyes scanning down his body and she realizes then that she is quite ensnared in his body.

"Oh my gosh!" she says as she begins to pull herself away.

Mike reaches for her as he sits up with her, "No, hey El, it's totally fine" he grabbed ahold of her wrist, causing her to stop moving. He has to admit her quick movements against his waist as she slid her leg away definitely stirred *something* within him.

She stops and sighs, "I'm sorry Mike. I didn't mean to totally invade you while you slept".

He chuckles, "El, don't worry about it, it...it was kind of nice" he casts her a curious look.

She softens, "Really?"

Mike nods, "Yeah, you're really warm".

El giggles, "Well, you're pretty comfy" she returns.

They sit there for a moment, Mike shifts his eyes quickly, opening his mouth to speak, "So, did you sleep okay?" he asks hesitantly.

El ponders for a moment, but then a smile grows on her face, her eyes peek up at him, "You know...that was actually some of the best sleep I've had".

Mike quirks an eyebrow up at her, "Really?" he asks.

She nods, "Yes, I actually had some really good dreams".

Mike softens, "Well, I'm glad to be of service then" he can't help but joke.

El's cheeks flush at her next words, "Hm, I might have to take up your services again" a teasing smile dances across her lips.

Mike's mouth drops open at her forwardness, "Uh...yeah, anytime" he stutters staring at her with awe.

She drops her head in shyness as she begins to shuffle the sheets away from them, both moving to stand on either side of the bed. Just as his two long legs hang off the side of the bed he turns towards her to ask what she'd like for breakfast and it's then that Mike catches her in the light of day.

He realizes that she's not wearing shorts like the initial thought he saw the night before, but boyshort cut panties, and his eyes widen as she stands. She stretches and yawns, not even carrying that he's there seeing her in what should be considered an intimate moment.

But, she only moves elegantly towards the bathroom, his eyes following her as if she's the only being in the world. His whole body stirs and awakens.

"Uh.." escapes his stupid mouth before he can stop them and his eyes widen when El stops at the bathroom door and she gives him a curious look.

"Wha-" she starts, thinking he asked her a question, her hand landing on the frame of the doorway, but then Mike notices her cheeks quickly reddening. His eyes watch hers flick downwards and then back up to his.

She tucks her lips as if she's trying not to laugh. It's then that Mike is

brought back to his senses as he looks down quickly and he realizes why she's flushing so madly.

And he's pretty sure he's about a hundred shades brighter than he in an instant as he sees his boxers tenting. He reaches quickly for a pillow and plops it down in his lap.

He moves his eyes to El, who is shying away from him.

"Uhhh..." he starts, not really sure how to explain *this* one.

But El gives him a teasing look, "Mike, don't worry about it" he breathes a sigh of relief as he tries to calm himself down.

However, El's eyes sneak back up to his, there's a teasing glint that's there, and he sees her contemplating her next choice of words.

Another sly smile that he is coming to enjoy very much inches onto her face as her eyes flick down towards the pillow in his lap and then back up to his eyes. And it's there that he sees something new, something different he's pretty sure he's never seen before.

Her pupils are slightly blown, '*Is it longing, or...something else?*', his brain tries to register what he sees.

But, before he can El gives him a wicked grin, "It's quite flattering actually" and with a quick wink she enters the bathroom and closes the door.

Mike's heart takes off like a racehorse, and he knows there's no way possible for him to calm himself down like he intended to before getting up after that comment. Because, '*Did she find him attractive?*'

And with that thought alone he realizes that he needs to take care of his raging *problem* so he scurries off to his own bathroom, hoping he can sort out his thoughts there. But as soon as he makes it to his bedroom door, all of his thoughts lead to one person, and he realizes with a groan, that he's in trouble.

Soooo, what do you guys think? Lots of Mileven in this chapter and some interesting tension is now being built between the two. Which I have A LOT of fun writing about hehehe.

I can't wait to get further into this story because it's pretty fun to write. I just really needed to have a chapter that was totally devoted to them and their growing feelings towards one another.

So let me know what you think by REVIEWING! :) Reviews are what make these stories and authors keep going! And thank you to those who do, they are greatly appreciated!

10. UPDATE NOT A CHAPTER

Hello everyone,

So, I've had a couple people message me and such because I know it's been awhile since I updated, and there is a reason behind that. My nana passed away last week and it's been extremely hard for me to be in the mood for writing. My nana was very special to me and the loss is still very raw. I'm also a counselor so trying to put others needs before mine has been incredibly difficult as well as I'm trying to manage my grief. The holidays are also up and coming which is keeping me incredibly busy with trying to get gifts completed too. And work has been very busy as well.

I apologize for the delay because I don't usually take this long to update unless I'm working on my other story which I'm not working on either. I will hopefully get back into the mood for writing at some point but I don't want to promise anything either. Truthfully, it might not be until after the holidays. So, please be patient I am not abandoning this story and I promise I will write more, just need time to be with my family and take care of myself. If I get the spark for writing I will definitely get a chapter out there if possible.

Thank you so much for all the support that has come from this story it makes me very happy. And thank you for hanging in there, it's much appreciated.